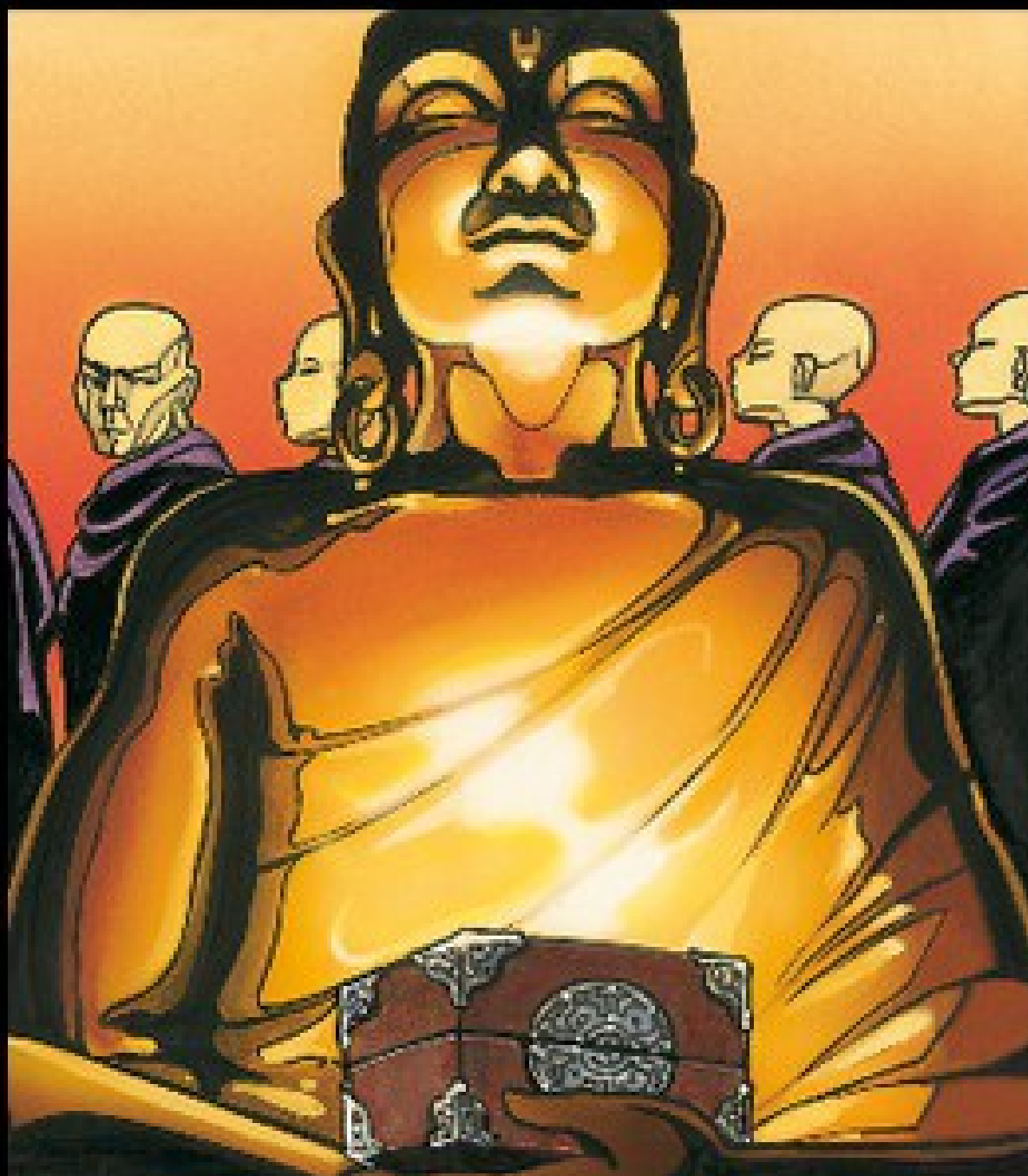


THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE SECRET OF THE MONKS' TREASURE





in

**THE SECRET
OF THE
MONKS' TREASURE**

While looking for a suitable location for a school movie project, Pete ventures into an abandoned warehouse. He accidentally stumbles upon a mysterious box with a tag containing characters in a foreign language. He takes the box but loses it when a knife-throwing man goes after him. The Three Investigators suspects that the box contains something valuable and they attempt to recover it. Little did they know that they are onto a secret that will have a huge impact on a religion.

The Three Investigators
in
The Secret of the Monks' Treasure

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1. The Movie Project

“I can’t think of anything else, Jupe. Blackout... Empty... I never thought it would be so hard to write a little story.” Annoyed, Bob Andrews looked up from his desk and straightened his back.

Jupiter Jones looked at him unmoved. The two friends were sitting inside an old mobile home trailer that served as the headquarters of their detective agency. While the wind whistled outside, they had been brooding for a good two hours over a script that was to be the basis for a movie. It was a movie production project for their school. Their lecturer, a former director from Hollywood, had suggested several themes and Bob and Jupiter immediately decided on ‘The Hunt for the Dark Secret’. Most of their schoolmates were more into sports or science fiction.

But the two boys were in complete agreement that the girls’ project was the scariest of all. They actually planned a love movie in which the star of a boy band falls in love with a schoolgirl. Only Pete Crenshaw, the other member of their detective agency, didn’t find the plot silly at all and he had already toyed with the idea of getting involved for the male lead role. But with foresight, Jupiter and Bob had grabbed hold of their fellow investigator and pulled him over to their project.

Mysteries and puzzles of all kinds were their passion. In the course of their detective career, Jupiter, Pete and Bob had already solved more than a hundred major cases and made their detective agency ‘The Three Investigators’ known far beyond Rocky Beach.

But experiencing exciting cases was easier than inventing them. They had met unusually early that Saturday, as the morning was said to be the most creative time.

Yawning, Bob had occupied himself with the beginning of the story, skipped the difficult middle part and now set his sights on the end, while Jupiter was already working on the first scenes to be filmed. He was to write the script. But since Bob was constantly incorporating new ideas into the story and had changed more than half of the original ideas, Jupiter was close to despair.

“Why don’t you take a break,” he suggested to Bob. “I’m getting fed up with your ideas. You can easily make ten movies out of it, but unfortunately we’re only shooting one—and that one has to be right!”

Bob turned up his nose and stood up to get a bottle of Coke. He was in desperate need of refreshment, and his eyes began to hurt from staring at the computer screen. He stood at the window, took a sip and looked at the clock. “Almost half past ten. What’s keeping Pete? He should be back by now.”

They had managed to lure Pete away from the girls’ project group, but the price had been high. They had to give in to Pete’s demands to let him have two important parts for the filming—the director and cameraman. Jupe and Bob had shaken their heads at first, but when Tina, a girl from the girls’ group, wanted to snatch Pete over to them, they grudgingly gave in.

So while Jupiter and Bob were sharpening their pencils, Pete had strapped on his inline skates and had gone to the Rocky Beach industrial area. There stood an abandoned warehouse which was an ideal location for their movie. The Three Investigators knew the

place well, because they had often played among the wooden barrels and rusty racks there in the past. But now Pete had to check it with a cameraman's eyes and make some test shots. However, the whole thing should not take much longer than an hour.

"The wind is getting stronger," said Bob, who was still staring out the window. "Pretty strong for our neighbourhood. Probably Pete can hardly move forward on his inline skates."

"Really?" Jupiter asked. "I rather think that he is stuck inside the warehouse with the wind howling outside, and he is scared stiff... Pete—alone in that scary warehouse? Wouldn't that be a good title for the movie? You know how panic-stricken our Second Investigator is, especially when we're not around."

Bob laughed. "Sure, he's a scaredy-cat. But the warehouse? What would Pete be afraid of in there?"

"He hears a rat and thinks there's a killer lurking. The curtain flutters and he sees scary ghosts. You can add more along the same lines," Jupe said.

"Maybe we should go there and scare him a little," Bob suggested. "Let's hang a tablecloth over our heads and throw pebbles at him. Perhaps we can get some good impromptu scenes for our movie."

"And I can save myself the trouble of rewriting your wacky story into a grandiose script. I don't find your latest idea very convincing—a devil spirit chose an old warehouse of all places to perform its atrocities."

Bob drew a pout. "Still better than the blackmail attempt of a bank robber you suggested," he replied, insulted. "Dead boring stuff. I've seen it a thousand times."

"It depends on what you do with it," replied Jupiter irritably. "I don't think my idea is so bad. A bank robber on the run, hiding in the warehouse. Playing children suddenly discover a banknote and get on his trail. You can shoot great scenes in the warehouse, for example, endless chases." He cleared his throat. "But unfortunately, you're responsible for the storyline for the movie."

"So we have decided—and we are going to stick to it. Fortunately, Jupe, because your bank robbery story would have amounted to nothing more than a series of complicated puzzles that only you could understand and solve." With this, he alluded to Jupe's mastermind and his penchant for logic, which had often annoyed his two fellow detectives, but had helped them out of their predicament often enough.

Bob put his hands on his hips and continued: "I for one would like it to be a bit more mystical. If you don't like the evil spirit, we can always come up with... say... a hidden diamond with magical powers..."

"Stop it, Bob! Here we go again! I propose we switch! I'm writing the story... and you write the script."

"No!"

"You just want to be the writer because you think it brings more honour!"

"Nonsense!"

"Then what's the problem?"

Bob took the bottle and drank it all in one go. "Pete is already over an hour late, Jupe. Perhaps it's time to start worrying about him after all."

Jupiter stood up and stepped next to Bob. Together they stared at the salvage yard grounds. Actually it was more like a junkyard that Jupiter's uncle Titus ran in Rocky Beach. His wife Mathilda helped him, when she wasn't busy looking for Jupiter and giving him one of her dreaded work assignments. Otherwise, she was always in the kitchen where she was a specialist. The reputation of Aunt Mathilda's cakes and pies had spread far beyond the salvage yard and her ice cream desserts were just as delicious.

But at that moment, Aunt Mathilda had other worries. From Headquarters, the two boys could see over to the Jones's house that the wind was threatening to tear off the bath towels Aunt Mathilda had stretched across a clothesline to dry. She rushed out and began to remove the towels in a hurry. Amused, Jupiter watched as she fought with a beach towel.

"Let's help her," he decided. The friends left the trailer.

A strong gust of wind slammed the door behind them. Grains of sand flew towards them. They narrowed their eyes and hurried to Aunt Mathilda, who was about to free herself from the cloth that had wrapped around her head. Together they got the matter under control and in a few minutes, they had rescued the laundry.

Just as Jupe and Bob were about to go back to the trailer, a distinguished Rolls-Royce with gold-plated trimmings rolled into the yard. Jupiter and Bob looked up in surprise.

Worthington was at the wheel—and Pete was sitting in the back seat.

2. Roll It!

“Because of a little wind, he’s being chauffeured like the Queen of England!” Bob couldn’t believe it.

Jupiter, however, frowned. He didn’t like the look on Pete’s face at all. And why Worthington?

Worthington was a chauffeur with the Rent-’n-Ride Auto Agency. Many years ago, around the time The Three Investigators started their detective agency, Jupiter had won a contest organized by the car rental company. The prize was a 30-day use of a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce. When the privilege expired, a former client of the investigators made an arrangement to pay for their continued use of the luxury car. Since then, Worthington had become a close friend of The Three Investigators, but they had not used the services of the chauffeur much after the three had obtained their driver’s licences and Pete and Bob had their own cars.

In the meantime, Pete had jumped out of the car. He had clamped his inline skates under one arm and the video camera in the other hand. Pete nodded at Worthington who was turning the huge car around.

Before Worthington drove out the big entrance gate, he greeted Jupiter and Bob by placing his hand on the chauffeur’s cap with a somewhat stiff-looking movement.

“Come here!” Pete shouted to his friends. He had already turned his back and ran straight to the trailer. His hair hung tangled in his face and his shirt had slipped out of his trousers.

Jupe looked at Pete, shaking his head. “I’m afraid Pete is in trouble,” he said and stomped off.

“Nonsense! He’s just showing off!” Bob knew Pete long enough to know that his friend was a dramatic performer. But he, too, got into action, coughing heavily because the wind was blowing the dirt across the salvage yard.

When Bob closed the door behind him, Pete had already fallen onto an armchair. But before anyone could say anything, he got up again and started walking back and forth nervously. “Man, am I glad to see you two! You wouldn’t believe what I just went through.”

“You met a ghost at the warehouse,” Bob guessed and he winked at Jupiter in amusement. Pete took a breath of indignation.

“If not, then a murderer ambushed you,” Bob tried again. He still felt that Pete was exaggerating.

“You are not taking me seriously,” Pete blurted out. “It’s not that I get scared when you’re not around! There really was a murderer! ... Or almost, anyway,” he added.

Bob looked at him sharply. “Well, I hope you got a good shot of him with your camera then.”

Pete interrupted his walk and crossed his arms. “Bob, you have no idea what happened, but that man could actually be on the video!”

He sat back down, put the camera in his lap and started to tinker with it. Slowly, Bob began to get curious. He stood next to Jupiter, who was already looking over Pete’s shoulder. In the meantime, the Second Investigator had rewound his recording, but he didn’t start the video yet.

"It's best if I tell you everything from the beginning," Pete decided. "On my way to the warehouse, I happened to run into Tina. We had ice cream together and she told me about the planned love story."

"How exciting," Bob thought. "I'm getting scared!"

Pete gave him a scornful look. "Then she met up with her friends and I went on to the warehouse. Look..." He pressed the start button and pointed to the small screen of the camera. "There's the building. Seen from this spot, it looks almost spooky—especially with those dark clouds behind." There was no more than a dark patch, as the monitor of the video camera was no bigger than a mobile phone display.

"Wait," Jupiter suggested, "we'll connect the video camera to the TV. Then we'll have a big picture and can follow your explanations better." He got some connecting cables and after a while, it was ready. "So... here we are. Roll it, Pete!"

The warehouse building appeared again. It was about fifty metres away and Pete had chosen the area of an undeveloped property as the foreground. Every now and then, the wind blew shreds of old plastic bags or other garbage across the picture. They could also hear the wind whistling.

"There's something at the back," Jupiter noticed and pointed to the screen. "It looks like a motorcycle."

"Very sharp, Jupe!" Pete nodded approvingly. "I didn't notice the vehicle at first, unfortunately..." he added.

The picture changed. Now it showed the hall of the warehouse. Pete had taken it from the back. Most of the window panes were broken and the wind tore at the sheet metal cladding. Next to one window, there was a rusty barrel, and under another one was an old bicycle. Jupe knew what was hidden behind the building wall—a room separated from the hall, in which several empty high shelves were rotting away. In the past, the three boys had played hide-and-seek there and were occasionally frightened by a scurrying rat.

Now there was movement in the scene. Pete rolled towards one of the windows. The picture rocked alarmingly.

"You can't possibly become our cameraman this way," teased Bob. "It makes you sick just watching it!"

Pete looked at him annoyed. "I'm filming this movie, I would not be wearing my inline skates!"

"As long as your story's got a solid foundation." The First Investigator grinned. "Bob's ideas are even shakier than your recording."

"And you get seasick on Jupe's script," Bob replied, insulted.

The three were silent and stared at the screen again. After a while, Pete had reached the window. Then the picture was momentary still because he had put the camera on the window sill.

Jupe and Bob saw Pete pull himself up the ledge and slide into the hall.

"And when will the murderer finally appear?" Bob asked.

"Wait..." Pete replied dryly. The camera was picked up again and slowly started moving. Close above the ground, it glided along as if a mini helicopter had flown through the corridors.

Jupiter was impressed. "Great effect, Pete. You held the camera down between your legs and skated along the corridors. Really creepy. It's almost like a ghost scurrying along—"

"Exactly!" Bob interrupted. "The devil's spirit pursues his victim!"

"It could just as well be the bank robber who is after the intruders," Jupiter groaned defensively.

Pete was far too impressed by his recording to go into more detail about his friends' ideas. It looked particularly fast when he took the curves. The camera whizzed along just above the ground. The scene suddenly changed as Pete rolled around another corner.

Then it happened. As if out of nowhere, something suddenly appeared. It rushed towards Pete, the camera was pulled up and then the picture whirled all over. From the loudspeakers of the television, a tumbling sound came out. It wasn't very loud, but loud enough to recognize that Pete slipped and fell down. When the picture became stable again, it showed nothing more than the ceiling of the warehouse. Then Pete's head appeared.

"So you took quite a beating," Bob commented sympathetically. "But what was that thing that got in your way?"

Pete decided to let the video speak for itself. "Just wait and see," he said.

3. The Mysterious Box

Pete had skated around the corner so fast that he almost banged onto a small table. He managed to avoid it but fell. On the table was an object. He had taken care of the video camera immediately after his fall. In the next moment, he got up and pointed the camera at the object on the table.

“A box,” mumbled Jupiter in surprise. “A reddish-brown antique box. What is it doing there?” He leaned closer to the screen. “Isn’t there a tag hanging from the handle?”

“Well spotted,” praised Pete.

Suddenly, the video camera picked up voices—in fact, two male voices—one louder than the other. Pete put a finger to his lips although Bob and Jupiter were quiet as a mouse anyway.

“Sounds like a foreign language,” Jupiter said in between.

Pete then placed the video camera on the table pointing at the box and left the recording on. His hands showed up, picked up the box and fiddled with it while the voices could still be heard in the background.

“Did you open the box?” Jupiter asked.

Pete shook his head. “No. I couldn’t do that. I noticed that it was secured with a combination lock like a briefcase. There were four little rotary dials and two latches, which can only be opened by sliding two buttons if you set the right number—or rather the right characters, because there were strange symbols on the dials.”

“Maybe it’s a treasure in there,” Bob said. His eyes began to shine. “Jewels, for example. What did that tag say?”

“A short text in a foreign language. I could not read it.” Pete pointed at the screen. “Do you know which part of the warehouse I was in?”

With such questions, Juve immediately felt challenged. He concentrated on the background of the video. After Pete had picked up the box earlier, the camera’s automatic focussing system reacted and focussed on the background.

“Wait... that must be in the passageway, yes, exactly where the heavy steel door is—the one that connects the warehouse with the large hall! You can see it in the background.” Juve looked at the video closely and noticed that the clock on the screen was 9:43 am.

Suddenly his breath stopped. “Pete, the door... it is moving... it is pushed open. The men are coming out.”

Pete did not answer and instead paused the recording. He stood up, turned the sound of the TV up to full volume and then let his recording continue.

The creaking of the heavy iron door, which was moving at a snail’s pace, now came out of the speakers much more impressively. The gap kept getting wider. Even while the men were still talking, the hard clacking of metal-clad shoe heels on the floor could be heard. Whoever was behind the door didn’t seem to know that Pete was there.

When the door was fully opened, they could see a shadow at the doorway. It was without a doubt a man. The light was too diffuse to see him clearly, but only one man appeared. He was not very tall, had black stubble hair and a bright, round face. The stocky figure of the

man was almost completely covered by a long grey coat. All his attention seemed to be focused on Pete. In surprise, the man cried out in English: "Hey, what are you doing here?"

The man crouched down slightly as if he was about to pounce on the Second Investigator. Although they could feel his gaze rather than see it, Jupiter and Bob felt cold down their spines.

Pete pressed the pause button and watched the man on the video. "I haven't been able to get a good look at him for long."

"I have met more likeable people," mumbled Jupiter. "He looks as if he's going to jump at your neck and strangle you—like a close combatant... What's with that long coat he's wearing?"

"You'll see in a moment," Pete replied briefly. He let the recording go on.

Suddenly the man shouted: "Put that box down!"

The camera was taken up... and now the picture was flying across the screen. You could hear Pete's breath and the rhythmic jerks of the skates. No doubt about it, he was on the run.

From the loudspeaker, the man's metal heels echoed, the footsteps getting faster and faster. The man had to be close behind Pete. Suddenly the recording broke off.

Jupiter turned around in horror. "What? Did that guy—"

"I must have pressed the off switch," Pete explained dryly.

"I'm not talking about the camera! What happened to you?" Jupe asked.

Pete shrugged his shoulders, but they could tell that he had to work hard to appear relaxed. The confrontation with the man had not gone by without leaving a mark on him. "But you saw it," he replied.

"I picked up the box to examine it more closely. Suddenly, I noticed the door being pushed open. I was like stuck until suddenly this guy appeared and stared at me. His looks could kill! He yelled something and jumped at me. I panicked, grabbed the camera, and then I just sped off!"

"And the box?"

"I had it in my hand, Bob. I wasn't thinking. I should have thrown it away! But I'm just not like Jupe, who always stays cool in such situations."

"Jupe has nerves of steel," Bob said, and a bit cheekily he added: "Whereas with you, one cannot really speak of nerves."

"I was just too scared. I would have liked to have seen you in my place, Bob. You probably would've stopped like a snowman and taken a good beating. I'd rather make a run for it when I can."

"Just because there's a guy there?" Bob asked.

"In the abandoned warehouse? The box? That guy? It's beyond weird!" Pete said.

Jupiter agreed with him. "I would have taken the box too," he explained. "But on purpose! Mysteries of all kinds interest me, and because there was something strange going on. There were at least two people present who wanted to do some business. The place and the circumstances of the handover do not suggest that this was an everyday occurrence. Pete, I'm guessing you walked in on a situation involving a theft or an extortion."

"True. Probably the police will be interested," Bob suspected and scratched his neck thoughtfully. Something about the exchange of words recorded on the video disturbed him, but he didn't know what was said. "It's a pity we can't understand a word. Seems to be an Asian language... Can you play that part for us again?"

Pete nodded and rewound the tape. The Three Investigators listened to the strange conversation a second time.

"If it was a hand-off, it certainly didn't go smoothly," Bob remarked as Pete stopped the recording. "In the end, it sounds like they're arguing. But maybe the contents of the box will help us. Come on, Pete, where is the box?"

Pete wanted to curb the curiosity a little more. As much as he had been afraid in the warehouse, he now took pleasure in his heroic role, which he felt almost forced into.

"One thing at a time," he said. "There is much clearer evidence that I've fallen into the middle of a dark business."

Pete reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small knife. The Second Investigator turned the wooden handle in his hand and made the bare edge flash.

"The knife thrower," he said as Jupe and Bob flinched. "He threw this knife at me... and it wasn't the only knife he carried."

"What? That guy attacked you with knives?" Jupiter picked up the weapon. The blade looked hand-made and the handle was metal and decorated with a dragon-like motif.

"Yes, probably three or four times," Pete explained. "Fortunately I had a few metres head start. But still one of the knives almost struck me."

Pete lifted up his left leg and it was only now that Jupiter and Bob noticed that his jeans had a long tear.

"Just the fabric," Pete casually explained. "My leg is fine. With my skates I had the advantage of course. I kept rolling in different directions and kept the guy off my neck. Finally I lured him to the end of the warehouse, rushed towards the window and threw myself over the window sill. I picked up the box and camera and sped across the field."

"You skated across the field?" Bob asked, surprised.

"It was sloping downwards... I had no choice if I had to get away and besides, the lead was enough. It would have been pretty close, though. Fortunately, he did not come after me."

Jupe wiped his hand across his forehead where a light sweat had formed.

"I guess he realized that it was no longer worthwhile," Pete continued. "I reached the street and started skating. Soon I felt safe. I decided to come straight here to check on the mystery of the box."

"But why did you show up with Worthington?" Bob interrupted him.

"Well, that is again connected with the motorcycle," Pete explained. "You remember, it was parked near the warehouse. While I was skating along the street, I heard a motorcycle approaching from behind. It was suspiciously slow. Anyway, I got a very strange feeling. Fortunately I turned around just in time."

"It was the knife thrower. He was on the motorcycle and steered towards me. The guy tried to run me down! Just in time, I dodged into the petrol station. I skated past the petrol pumps and out through the back exit, and I came onto the parallel road leading to the city centre. But the motorcycle resurfaced shortly afterwards."

Pete took a new Coke, less for thirst than to increase the tension. Jupiter and Bob kept silent as Pete took several sips before putting the bottle down.

"A small group of skaters rode on the hard shoulder. I pushed myself between them. That confused the knife thrower a little. But then the other skaters suddenly turned into a street and I was alone again. There was only one skater further back, but he was quite far away. The knife thrower took advantage of that. He was right behind me again."

"Surely he was after the box," Bob said. "Why didn't you just throw it away?"

Before Pete could answer, Jupiter intervened: "Prohibited question! The Three Investigators never miss a mystery."

"But that was not the reason," Pete openly admitted. "In my panic, I didn't even think about it. In the meantime, I had reached downtown Rocky Beach and skated along the main

street. I immediately changed to the side walk. Just as I passed the entrance of Meyers Department Store, the guy came out of nowhere and grabbed me. I barely got away, and I raced into Meyers.” Pete laughed briefly. “In retrospect, it was almost funny. You should have seen the way people jumped aside. I went up an escalator and down a lift. There was no sign of my pursuer. Then I escaped out the side exit. The coast seemed clear.”

“Now you were near Rent-’n-Ride Auto Agency where Worthington works!” Jupiter remarked. “That’s how you saved yourself!”

“Right. I entered Rent-’n-Ride from the back gate. Then I saw Worthington coming back from a drive, turning into the yard from the front gate. Just as he was about to get out, I went up to him and told him that someone on a motorbike was after me. Well, you know Worthington. Sometimes he can be very formal and cool. But when it comes right down to it, he’s quick.

“‘Take a seat, young sir,’ he just said, holding the back door open for me. He wouldn’t let anything like that get in his way. I threw myself in the back seat and Worthington drove off. That saved me. I’m safe now.”

Jupiter and Bob were thinking about Pete’s story. What kind of situation that Pete got mixed up in? He hadn’t answered all of the questions yet—the most important being where was the mysterious box.

Pete leaned back and took a breath. He hadn’t had so much to say in a long time as he did today. He felt his escapade preoccupied Jupiter and Bob, although he suspected that it was more the mystery of the box that moved his friends than the concern for him.

Pete was about to tell what had happened to the box when the telephone rang.

The First Investigator picked up the phone and at the same time, he switched on the loudspeaker. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

The man on the other end didn’t introduce himself. “I’d like to speak to Pete Crenshaw. It’s urgent.”

“What’s this about, mister?”

“It’s about his life.”

4. The Clock is Ticking

The Second Investigator went white as a sheet. “Pete is on his way here,” Jupiter said into the receiver after a moment of shock. He tried to keep his nerve. “May I know who is calling?”

“I know Pete Crenshaw is with you,” the man replied coolly. He spoke with a strange accent that certainly wasn’t American. “Look, if you don’t take me seriously, you’re next on the list.”

Jupe swallowed and threw an uncertain look at Pete. Although Pete was shaking all over, he motioned to Jupe to give him the phone. “Pete Crenshaw here.”

“Watch it, Crenshaw. If you want to live to see another day, you better give me back that box right now.”

“What... the box? But... but I don’t have it anymore!” stuttered Pete. There was a moment of silence. Jupiter and Bob looked at Pete in horror. Was it a bluff or the truth?

“Don’t lie to me,” the man said.

“But it’s true, sir! I had the box... but... but when I ran off... I believe... perhaps I dropped it. Perhaps I could find it, sir! Yes, I will find it! But not that quickly... It takes time and I have to... look for it... but I promise you I’ll look for it!”

For a few seconds, the man said nothing. “Okay... so you need time,” he said. “You shall have time... but you have only this afternoon. You must deliver the box to me at 6 pm sharp. It can’t fall into anyone else’s hands before then, you hear? You cannot give it to anyone else—no matter who asks you. And I advise you to be on time. Then everything will be fine. If not, you’ll be in serious trouble. I warn you first.” The man on the other end of the line paused. “You know the fountain at St Anne’s Square?”

“The rock fountain?”

“Yes. There is a litter bin on the right. You wrap the box in a plastic bag and put it into the bin at exactly 6 pm, not earlier, not later. Then you go away. I don’t want to see anyone there but you! I don’t want the police there either! I hope you realize what will happen to you if you don’t carry out my instructions. I’ll find you sooner or later! You can’t get away from me, Mr Pete Crenshaw.”

“Mister, I’ll... I’ll do my best.”

“All right. And one more thing. Did you try to open the box?”

“No, sir!”

“That is good, very good... Don’t do it! There’s an explosive in there to protect it in case it falls into the wrong hands. On the third attempt, it will self-destruct. Woe to him who holds it in his hands.”

“I... I understand.”

“Six o’clock. Don’t be late!” It clicked. The man had hung up.

It took Pete two attempts to hang up the phone, as he was shaking with fear. He had not expected this call. How on earth did that man know his name? And where he currently was? It was obvious that the caller must have been the knife thrower. That was no joke. It could of course have been the other man from the warehouse—the one he hadn’t seen. The thoughts whirled through Pete’s head. Above all, one thing worried him—the box.

“Of course we won’t deliver the box,” Jupiter announced.

Pete looked at him startled. “What?”

“Now it is exactly 11:33. We have until 6 pm. Until then, we’ll try to solve the case—provided you actually know where the box is.”

“No way! We’re not touching this anymore!” Pete exclaimed.

“Why not? He’s just bluffing. We’ll hide you if we have to. We can also inform Inspector Cotta!”

“Yeah, so? That man can still catch me tomorrow... or in a week... or in a year! After all, it’s my life and not yours! I’ll give him back the box and that’s it.”

Now Bob interfered. “Pete is right,” he said. “He has to decide for himself. In any case, I suggest we deliver the box at the time requested. However, there’s no reason why we can’t use the time until then to do some careful investigation. If we’re going too far, Pete, you can slow us down.”

Pete mumbled something that Bob quickly took to be an agreement. “But now, I’m beginning to wonder where the object of desire is,” Bob said.

Pete turned red. “In a rubbish bin,” he murmured softly.

“Excuse me?” Jupiter asked in surprise.

“Rubbish bin!”

“You threw it in a rubbish bin? Where is the bin? We’ll go get it now!” Jupiter was about to jump up.

“At Rent-’n-Ride,” Pete said sheepishly. “It was getting too hot for me. Before I skated to Worthington, I put that thing in the rubbish bin there.”

“Well, then we have to go there immediately!” cried Jupiter. “Otherwise someone else will find the box... If so, I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes!”

The Three Investigators decided to take Bob’s Beetle. It was faster than riding a bike in such windy conditions.

They grabbed their jackets and Jupiter also took along the video camera. He planned to find someone who could interpret the conversation in the foreign language for him. And maybe they could take other important shots with the camera.

Bob had parked his Beetle at the salvage yard. Jupiter pushed Pete into the back seat and instructed him to check if they were being followed. The Second Investigator was happy to have a job so he didn’t have to think about the phone call that had given him a proper fright. He looked through the back window, but he did not notice anything unusual—at least not a red motorcycle with a crazy knife thrower on the handlebars.

But when something crackled in Pete’s pocket and he stuck his hand in it, the Second Investigator discovered something else. It was a small piece of paper. It was the tag that was hanging on the box, the one he’d put in his pocket when he fled. He’d forgotten all about it. It was a little crumpled, but otherwise unharmed.

Pete took it out and for the first time he looked at it calmly. It was a thick, extraordinary paper. Someone had written a text on it with a fine nib. Five lines of text of varying lengths—but not in English. The characters looked very strange.

“This is the tag on the box,” Pete said, passing it forward to Jupiter.

Jupiter examined the paper more carefully than Pete did. “I have no idea in what language this is written in, but it’s not Chinese—not East Asian. It looks more like Hindi or another language from India. The way the lines are arranged, I guess it’s the verse of a poem.”

Jupe gave the tag back to Pete and looked at Bob. "When we find the box, we'll go to the library and try to figure out what the text means. Maybe it contains a hint of the combination code that we can use to open the box. And then we'll know if this is really about a treasure or something else entirely. What do you think, Bob?"

Bob nodded and braked as the light turned red. "We're almost there," he said. He looked at the pedestrians who, in his opinion, were crossing the street far too slowly. Then finally the traffic light changed and Bob could turn into the street where the car rental agency was located.

Full of verve, he rolled onto the company's yard after a few metres. But immediately he stepped on the brakes. Jupiter almost slipped off his seat, but the seat belt held him back. Only Pete had unbuckled too soon and he had hit the front seat.

"This can't be happening," Bob moaned. "This is the wrong time for the garbage man to turn up!"

Two strong men were just about to roll one bin after the other to their truck, whose built-in garbage compactor was inexorably swallowing up the contents.

Bob parked in the next available space. One of the men was just pushing another rubbish bin.

"That's the bin!" cried Pete excitedly. "Number 63, I remembered the number! Come on, move it! Don't let him put it into the garbage truck!"

With breathtaking speed, which no one would have thought possible, the chubby First Investigator jumped out of the car and positioned himself next to the garbage man. He confidently put his hand on the bin. "Would you mind if I stick my nose in there for a minute?"

The man flinched and then flicked Jupiter's hands off the lid. "Come on, boy, get out of my way! I want to finish this quick!"

When Bob and Pete also joined in, the garbage man's gaze became angrier. He waved at his colleague. "Hey, there are some guys here trying to stop us from working!"

"Are those guys going through other people's trash again?" His colleague stomped over. "I've had it with you guys! You run around searching trash from every actor who's been in any movie hit—looking for grubby traces of his life to publish in a newspaper. And then we have to clean up the mess! Don't stick your noses into other people's trash and give us more work!"

Jupe took a breath. "This bin belongs to the car rental agency!"

"They too have a right to their privacy," the man replied. "Now get out of here."

Bob intervened. "Mister! It's not about spying on people. We just accidentally threw something in there and want it back before it gets compacted. Nothing more."

"Accidentally thrown something away? Oh, yeah, and what is it?"

"A little reddish-brown box," Pete said. "We'll show it to you if you let us open the bin."

"I can't wait to see it!" Now the man took his hand off the bin.

"Bet they won't find anything," his colleague announced. "I've been waiting a long time to get my hands on these trash looters!"

"Do what you have to," Jupiter said and lifted the lid resolutely. "But unfortunately you will come to the conclusion that we are right!" He looked inside.

Two disgusting garbage bags stank towards him. "The box must have dropped down underneath," he said and pulled one of the bags out. Brown juice ran down the outside and dripped onto the concrete pavement. As best he could, Jupiter only wanted to touch the bag with his fingertips, but it was heavy and almost slipped out of his hand.

Pete held his breath and put his head in the bin. There was no box. Carefully he pushed the second bag aside and finally lifted it out completely. Again, nothing.

Jupiter gave his friend a nervous look. "Are you sure this is the right bin?"

"Absolutely," said Pete, wiping his hands with a handkerchief. "This must be it. I'm not so stupid that I can't even remember the number!"

"Well, what do you know..." the garbage man shouted. Slowly he seemed to enjoy the action. His colleague also watched the spectacle with a grin and playfully clenched his fists.

Pete couldn't take it anymore. He reached into the rubbish with his bare hands. Banana peels, coffee filters, mouldy oranges—it all dropped to the concrete pavement.

"You'll put that back," said the first garbage man, folding his arms. He couldn't believe it when Pete leaned deeper into the bin and burrowed until his hand hit the bottom.

Pete reappeared with a red face. "We're too late," he said and swallowed. "The box is gone! Someone has taken it!"

"Now put all of that back!" the garbage man ordered, pointing to the rubbish on the pavement.

While Pete and Bob took care of the garbage, Jupiter looked into the three remaining bins under the men's suspicious looks. The first was only half full, but there were no sign of a box. The other two were already empty—the contents having been put into the garbage truck.

"That's it," he murmured, disappointed. He helped Pete and Bob put the garbage back into the bin and then they trotted back to the car under the smirking eyes of the garbage men.

"What do we do now?" Bob asked dejectedly. "The box is gone. Pete is in trouble big time! Shall we go to the police and tell them everything? Or is it better to hide Pete from the knife thrower? We don't even know how serious the caller is!"

"It's best if I disappear into thin air for a while," Pete said in frustration.

They were silent. The wind blew a used coffee filter across the yard.

Suddenly, Jupiter exclaimed: "I have an idea where the box might be!"

5. Dealing with Rubbish-George

Pete's face gained colour again. "Where?"

"Rubbish-George!" Jupiter exclaimed. "He's got his shack in one of the backyards around here!"

Rubbish-George was a well-known vagrant in Rocky Beach. He was unkempt and smelly, had long yellowish-grey hair, a beard and spotted teeth. For a long time, he 'lived' in a makeshift shack in a backyard of Little Rampart. He liked to rummage through rubbish bins, always looking for all sorts of things that people threw away that he could use.

"If Rubbish-George has the box, I only hope that he didn't try to open it... or it will be destroyed and everything will be gone... including him!" Pete exclaimed.

"Did you remember what combination the dials were set to?" Bob asked.

"I told you—they weren't all numbers, the first two were symbols—like a monkey... then something like a blue wave... I don't know. I can't remember. It all happened much too fast in the old warehouse! And you couldn't see it on the video recording either. The picture was not clear enough."

"Let's hope Rubbish-George has kept his hands off that lock. At worst, he might even hurt himself," Bob feared.

Jupiter wrinkled his nose. "Well, we don't have to be overly pessimistic. We must first check whether he even has the box. Let's not waste any time!"

As Rubbish-George was practically living around the corner, they left the car and ran. They went down two streets into a shady corner of Rocky Beach. Among the locals, the area was called 'Little Rampart' after the infamous district in Los Angeles, but of course it was much smaller. Actually, Little Rampart only referred to three or four blocks of houses, in whose backyards, the wild street and music culture from Los Angeles cast a few shadows.

A short time later, The Three Investigators came through a graffiti-sprayed gate and entered a yard area for which the term 'chaotic' would have been an understatement. For years, everything here had gone mouldy and deteriorated—parts of old furniture, rubber tyres, electronic scraps. The home owners did not seem to care.

In all the confusion, the vagrant's wooden shack seemed almost like a resting place. Rubbish-George had installed it in a secluded corner between two house walls. The roof was an old truck tarpaulin that still had the advertising slogan of a trucking company on it. It rattled in the wind.

With a few steps, the boys had crossed the yard. Jupiter was looking for a door, but he found none. Several wide planks were nailed together. From inside the shack, loud music emanated. "Beach Boys," Bob noticed.

So Rubbish-George seemed to be at home. When Jupe happened to lean against one of the boards, it gave way. It was a secret revolving door. The First Investigator landed inside the shack with a thud.

What he saw somehow reminded him of his uncle's salvage yard. Inside the shack, Rubbish-George had collected over time all the things he thought he needed. Shelves full of junk, with a gas stove in between, on which a soup was steaming. Surf music was coming out of a CD player. In the corner was a rusty bed. On it was Rubbish-George. He seemed

surprised when Pete and Bob stumbled in a short time after Jupiter. With a quick movement, he hid something under his leather jacket.

“Ah, The Three Investigators,” he said, and his face relaxed a little. “Are you snooping around in other people’s affairs again? I saw nothing. I heard nothing. I really can’t help you!”

Jupiter smiled. “George, you don’t know what this is all about.”

“You’re always in some crazy situation. Just leave me alone!” He turned away and audibly pulled the air through his nose. “Is there any chance that something smells like garbage in here?”

Guiltily, The Three Investigators stared at their hands. Now Jupiter smelled it too. It was the result of their rubbish bin search.

Jupiter cleared his throat. “What are you hiding under your jacket there, George?”

But it was never easy to get something out of Rubbish-George. “A treasure, of course.” He smiled. With his free hand, he wiped back his long grey hair, revealing his cunning eyes. “What are you looking for?”

“A box—reddish-brown in colour. We hope you fished it out of a rubbish bin, otherwise we’ll have a big problem,” Bob let it slipped out. “And so do you. If you open it improperly, it may explode!”

Rubbish-George pondered. He got up and turned down the surf music. He dropped back down on the bed and started groaning. “What have you got?”

“For the box?” Pete asked hopefully.

“For showing you what I found.”

The Three Investigators looked at each other. Rubbish-George was really a sly dog. But time was running out and they had no choice.

“A dollar?” Jupiter offered.

“Ten.”

Jupiter paused for a while and then said: “We can only afford five.”

“Ten.”

“Eight,” Jupiter said. “Final offer.”

“Ten.” Rubbish-George grinned and pulled his jacket tighter.

The Three Investigators opened their wallets moaning and collected dollar bills until it finally corresponded to the amount demanded. Grinding his teeth, Jupiter handed over the money. “And now the item, please.”

But Rubbish-George first put the money on the bed and counted it. Then he lifted up his jacket with a grin. An elongated object slipped out, fell to the ground and remained lying at the feet of the detectives.

“But... that’s not the box at all,” cried Pete, disappointed.

“I didn’t say that it was.” Rubbish-George’s eyes flashed. He triumphed with his successful deception.

Pete swallowed and bent over. Carefully he picked up the object.

“Look, a throwing knife!” he said. “The exact same design as the one that was thrown at me. Look, here is the dragon-like motif!”

Trembling, he passed it on to Jupiter, who took a close look at it, then pulled out a plastic bag and let the evidence disappear inside. Jupiter turned back to the tramp who stared at him in surprise. “Where did you find this?” he asked.

“At the car rental agency,” Rubbish-George replied. “Do you know whose it is?”

“A knife thrower,” Pete said. “He looks like he just stepped out of a bad Asian action movie. Specifically where did you find this?”

“One of the bins!” George replied. “Where else?”

“Oh, no!” Pete cried. “The knife thrower have been rummaging in the bins and probably dropped his knife in there!”

Rubbish-George shook with disgust. “Well, I’m glad I got rid of that knife... or else that guy will cut off my hair!”

“Or he’ll shave you,” Bob said dryly.

Rubbish-George laughed, but Pete did not even pull a face. The knife had made him suddenly realize the dangerous situation he was in. What distressed him most was if Rubbish-George had found the knife in the rubbish bin at the car rental agency, it was likely that the knife thrower now possessed the box. So, of course, everything could be settled. But what if the knife thrower was not the caller?

“Let’s get out of here,” Pete urged.

“Okay.” Jupiter nodded and pushed Pete and Bob to the board that worked as a secret revolving door. “By the way, George, you have an interesting entrance.”

“Really? A circus once left me two of these secret doors!”

“And where’s the other one?”

Rubbish-George smiled. “It’s not only detectives who need emergency exits!”

Jupiter could understand that very well. “Until next time, George!”

“There’s always a next time,” George called after him and turned the music back up.

“Rubbish-George has all sorts of tricks up his sleeve,” said the First Investigator as they walked through the courtyard again. “We probably just wasted ten dollars.”

Bob nodded. “I’d let him have the ten dollars if we had enough of our own... Look! There’s someone in front of us!”

There was a dark figure standing in the driveway. When he noticed The Three Investigators, he ducked into the shadow of a dark alley on the side.

“Pete!” Jupe said. “Was that the knife thrower?”

“I can’t tell,” Pete replied. “It’s too dark to see his face clearly.”

The Three Investigators looked into the alley as they passed by, but could not see anything. “I wonder who that was,” Bob asked as they stood on the street again. “Creepy guy.”

Jupe shook his head. “Keep cool, Bob. He’s hiding from us, not us hiding from him!”

Now it was enough for Pete. “Listen! My life is in danger and you have nothing better to do than to worry about a guy we haven’t even seen properly,” he exclaimed. “The whole area here is full of such dodgy characters! Do you even know what the appearance of the knife means?”

Jupiter nodded. Pete was right. They had to get back to the basics. “There is a possibility that the knife thrower has taken possession of the box,” he answered Pete’s question.

“Nice way of putting it!” Pete said. “And how am I supposed to get the box back now?”

“Perhaps,” said Jupiter, “the case is even closed. If the caller and the knife thrower are one and the same person, we can now comfortably go back to Headquarters and mark the case as unsolved.”

“And if not?” Pete continued.

At that moment, Bob was tugging Jupiter at his sleeve. “Look,” he shouted. “There’s a red motorcycle parked over there! That can’t be a coincidence!”

“Let’s take a closer look,” Jupiter decided immediately.

“Without me,” Pete said immediately.

“You wanna wait here alone, Pete?” Jupe asked.

“I’m not saying that, but—” Pete began but Jupiter had already started running towards the motorcycle.

6. Worthington Saves the Day

The red motorcycle was parked in a side street in front of the back entrance of Meyers. While Pete sneaked into the store to watch everything through the shop window, Jupiter and Bob set out to examine the vehicle.

It had a California registration plate. It was a common Japanese model, and dozens of them could be seen in Rocky Beach. What was unusual was the expensive design. There were two storage compartments fixed on either side of it. Jupiter nodded at Bob and they each took one. But as expected, the compartments were locked up. Jupiter and Bob had to retreat without having achieved anything.

“Nothing,” Bob said when Pete came out of Meyers. “And now what?”

Jupe shrugged his shoulders. “I suggest that we stake out the bike until the knife thrower arrives. Then we follow him.”

Pete was not very enthusiastic. “What for? So he could have another chance to get to know me better?”

“So you can get the box back,” replied Jupiter, “if the knife thrower has found it at all. I’d like to check that. We can do it this way—Pete will wait here. Don’t worry, Pete. You go back into Meyers behind the window display again while I go to Rent-’n-Ride with Bob and ask if anyone has seen anything suspicious in the yard. At the same time, we can get the Beetle back.”

“Bob should stay with me,” Pete demanded.

“I don’t mind. Then I’ll go alone,” Jupe agreed. “Give me the car keys, Bob.”

Reluctantly, Bob pulled out his bunch of keys. It didn’t suit him that he should assist Pete while Jupiter did the important things again. “Why don’t you stay with Pete and I’ll go to Rent-’n-Ride?”

“Come on, Bob, let’s not argue over this now,” Jupe said. “Or else we’ll still be here tomorrow morning.”

Bob still hesitated. The First Investigator pulled the car keys out of Bob’s hand and ran off.

When Jupiter entered the yard of Rent-’n-Ride, the garbage collectors had long since moved on and the rubbish bins were back in place. The wind was still whistling around his ears, but the First Investigator took the time to get an overview.

The Rolls-Royce was still parked where it had been earlier. Worthington was probably still around. And it was quite possible that he or one of the other employees of the company had seen something suspicious through the large glass window that faced the courtyard.

Jupiter entered the rental company’s reception through the side door. Apart from the receptionist who knew Jupiter from previous encounters, nobody was present. The lady was sitting behind a counter, doing something on the computer while waiting for customers. When she noticed Jupiter, she hesitated briefly, then a smile flitted across her face.

“Ah, Jupiter... Jones, if I remember correctly. Has that man managed to get to you?”

Jupiter looked at her in astonishment. “What man?”

“Well, actually, it wasn’t you he wanted to see, but Pete, your friend. The man found a bunch of keys that Pete lost. He came in right after Pete and Worthington left, and I gave him your phone number from our customer list. It’s still correct, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes,” Jupiter said quickly. Pete? Lost his keys? That was nonsense. “What did the man look like?” he asked suspiciously.

The woman frowned. “Oh, gosh, he was in some sort of casual clothes. I think he was from China or Korea.” She laughed. “Of course, if I’d known you wanted to know, I would have looked at him longer. Is something wrong?”

“No, no, it’s all right,” Jupiter rushed to say. It was no use. He had to get into the game and try to get more out of it. “In the meantime everything has been cleared up,” he said. “Pete probably lost his keys when he came skating around here this morning.”

“But why were you looking for something in the rubbish bin?” the woman asked.

“Ah! So you saw us! Yes... we didn’t know then that the key had long since resurfaced. The man just called us... a while ago.” This could have been wrong both in terms of time and before the woman noticed it, Jupiter quickly directed the subject to the point that was decisive for him: “Did you actually see other people by the rubbish bins?”

The woman shook her head. “No, but I wasn’t always looking out there. There are customers that I have to attend to. But why don’t you go to the back and ask Worthington if you’re so interested? He’s in the kitchen drinking coffee. His next assignment is not for another hour.”

“I’ll be happy to do so. Thank you very much.”

The woman pressed a hidden button that opened the small half-height door separating the reception from the back office.

Jupe thanked her with a nod. He knew the way from previous visits. He only needed to walk through a small corridor, and then he came directly to the kitchen where the company employees had their breaks. There was not much going on today. Worthington sat alone at one of the two tables.

He had a half-empty cup of coffee before him. And next to it was a little reddish-brown velvet box!

At that moment, Worthington stood up. “Mr Jupiter Jones,” he said, as he always did, but there was a warmth to his voice. “Sit down, please. May I offer you some coffee?”

Jupiter waved as he was speechless and couldn’t take his eyes off the box.

Worthington noticed his reaction. “Interesting, isn’t it? I found this in our rubbish bin,” he explained. As Jupiter frowned, he continued: “Pete had quite a lot of dirt and mud stuck to his skates. I had to clean the footwell of the Rolls-Royce with a broom and dustpan. And when I swept the dirt into the rubbish bin, I found this box. I don’t think that an antique box like that belongs in the trash!”

Jupiter took the box in his hand. So that was it—the object of desire! They went through trash, paid Rubbish-George but got nothing back. They were beginning to think the search was over... but now it was different. Worthington had the box laid there on the table as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

Jupiter was still speechless when he took the box and carefully inspected it. There was a finely drawn, but complicated picture painted on the lid. It depicted a fierce, monster-like creature wearing a crown of five skulls, and holding a wheel in its claws. The wheel was divided into sections, each of which had drawings of people and animals in different scenes. The sides of the box were artfully embedded in soft reddish-brown velvet.

He wondered what the box contained that was valuable? Maybe a jewel? Jupiter kept turning the box. On its front side, there were four rotary dials between two latches, and below

that were two buttons. The first two showed exactly as Pete had reported—small pictures. Jupiter saw that the first was a dragon and the second, fire. So someone must have turned the dials as Pete had said that he saw a monkey and ‘something like a blue wave’. The third and fourth dials had numbers on them. They were both at zero. Most importantly, the box was still intact.

“Worthington, have you tried to open it?” Jupe asked.

Worthington nodded. “I wanted to know, of course, if there was anything in the box that would help me find the owner... I can’t imagine such a valuable box being simply thrown away. Just for fun, I chose the dragon and matching fire and turned the numbers to zero.”

“But it didn’t work,” Jupiter surmised. “Did you try other combinations after that?”

Worthington shook his head. “No, I did not. There are so many possibilities, so that’s more for a mystery man like you.”

“So just one try,” mumbled Jupiter with relief. At least two possibilities remained to open the box whereby the final one had to be right. Jupiter carefully turned the dials without touching the buttons or latches.

The first dial showed a total of twelve animals, which Jupiter could easily recognize as the Chinese zodiac signs—mouse, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog and pig. The second dial had only five symbols—wood, fire, earth, metal, and water, and those are the five elements of Chinese philosophy. The two number dials ran from zero to nine. “That makes six thousand possibilities,” he murmured.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing at all,” said Jupiter. “Worthington, do you mind if we take care of this box? This is a job for The Three Investigators.”

Worthington smiled. “Not a problem. If anybody can crack this nut, you can. I’ll be happy to give you the box, especially since I can’t shake the suspicion that you already know more about it than you’re saying.”

Jupiter did not reply, but he was beaming. In a quite unexpected way, they had taken a big step forward. They had the box, and now they had a chance to uncover its secret.

Suddenly the receptionist came into the kitchen. She seemed upset. “Worthington,” she said, irritated. “Can you help me, please? There’s a strange guy out there who I just can’t handle!”

Jupiter noticed. “Rubbish-George?” He faltered. “Or maybe...”

Worthington went out to the corridor and Jupiter followed a few steps behind. Just before reaching the reception, Jupe took a careful glance at the man. Although he had dark glasses on, Jupiter recognized him immediately. It was the guy Pete had recorded on his video camera—the guy with the long coat, under which he had hidden the knives.

That could hardly bode well. Unfortunately, the man looked up and saw Jupe. For seconds, they couldn’t take their eyes off each other. It was like a duel. Only when Jupiter tried to hide the box under his jacket did the man move. He lifted his coat and made a sporty leap over the reception table. Jupiter knew that his opponent was a well-trained man. If he didn’t get enough of an advantage, he wouldn’t stand a chance.

“Please stop him, Worthington,” he called out to the chauffeur.

Jupiter turned back and saw the receptionist who was behind him. “Where is the back door?” he asked, and she pointed down the corridor.

Jupiter ran off. As he pushed the door open to the outside, he turned around and just saw Worthington holding back the pursuer.

7. The Monks from Asia

Worthington's efforts did not hold the man back for long. He leapt back over the reception table and rushed outside through the main entrance. Jupiter didn't have much of a head start. In addition, the man chasing him was physically superior to him. The only thing holding him back in the race was his long grey coat.

While Jupiter sped along the road, he thought hard. The best thing was to flee as directly as possible to Pete and Bob. The three of them could split up and thus had a better chance of saving the box.

The First Investigator had just gone halfway, when he heard the hard clacking sound of the knife thrower's metal shoes coming closer and closer. Suddenly Jupiter thought he heard other, softer-sounding footsteps. Was there anyone else running after him? But the First Investigator did not dare to look back. Unless a miracle happened right away, it was over.

Jupiter evaded a woman with shopping bags. He heard her ranting angrily at him. He almost lost the box he was clutching with one hand. The pursuer reached for his jacket. Jupiter felt a hand on his shoulder. He couldn't shake it off for three or four steps. A cry of fear suffocated his lips.

Then he managed to tear loose and the man's hand slipped off his jacket. It wasn't far to Meyers department store. Pete and Bob must have spotted him by now. Jupiter crossed the small side street where the back entrance of Meyers was located.

A car braked. The First Investigator just missed being hit. That was close. He heard a slight impact and the cursing of his pursuer. He regained a few metres of lead and that gave him new strength. Just a few more metres and he would be with Pete and Bob. The Three Investigators would then have to come up with something.

But when Jupiter turned around shortly before the back entrance of Meyers, he couldn't see the man in the coat. Rather surprised than relieved, Jupiter scanned up and down the street. Nothing. The man had vanished without a trace.

Even before the First Investigator could wonder about it, he discovered another man running towards him. Was it the same pursuer? But instead of a grey coat, this man wore a strange maroon and yellow robe, and he seemed to be taller and stronger. Jupiter could see that this man was definitely not the knife thrower. Then who was it? Maybe the two men were together and had taken turns chasing him?

Jupiter turned around and slid through the door. Pete and Bob were already waiting for him. Pete had his video camera pointed at the First Investigator.

"Super action," Pete commented. "Jupe's socks are steaming."

"Stop it! I just saved your skin," Jupiter hissed. "I have the box! But I'm being followed. Let's get out through the main entrance!"

They ran off, weaving in between the displays of items. Pete just let the camera go on and followed Jupe. Bob came after him. The new chaser was right on their heels.

The customers stared at the boys in amazement, and all that was missing were the security guards stopping them. But the guard at the entrance looked at them motionlessly. Within a short moment, they were back on the street.

But just like his predecessor, this pursuer proved to be stubborn. He came closer and closer. Jupiter still held the box tightly as they raced past the passers-by. Then Jupiter felt a firm grip on his arm. Just in time, he threw the box to Pete. Although the Second Investigator was holding his video camera, he caught the box safely with his other hand and raced off.

“Lesley!” Jupiter cried and he hoped that Pete and Bob had heard it. Then he turned around and threw himself with his last ounce of strength and all his weight on the pursuer.

Now Jupiter had only one goal—to hold the guy off as long as possible so that Pete could escape with the box.

The surprise action had an effect. The man managed to dodge Jupiter but landed hard on the ground. Then Jupiter just let himself fall on him. Given his weight, this would have pinned down most opponents, but with a few well-practised grips, the man had quickly freed himself again.

Without knowing what happened to him, it was Jupiter who was left lying down on the pavement. The opponent almost squeezed the air out of him. But most importantly, Pete and Bob had managed to escape. Some passers-by stopped and watched curiously.

“Everything’s fine,” the man cried. “It’s a shoplifter!”

Jupiter wanted to protest, but in this situation, no one would believe him anyway.

The man pulled Jupiter up. Now the First Investigator could see his new pursuer properly for the first time. He was slightly taller than Jupiter and had a finely cut face from which two cold eyes were staring at him. “Tashi Yudron,” he said. That was obviously his name. “And you are the one who stole the box!”

“No, mister! That’s not true!”

“Step aside for a moment.” He pushed Jupiter out of the middle of the pedestrian walkway and the small crowd of onlookers that had formed quickly dissipated. But as long as he was around people, Jupiter felt reasonably safe. It also reassured him that the man had introduced himself to him. It was unusual, but perhaps he was not really a gangster. Jupiter thought about how he could get more out of him.

“Was it you who stopped the knife thrower?” he asked.

“It’s none of your business!” the man said.

“Did you call me earlier?”

“You? No.”

“What are you gonna do with me?” Jupe asked.

“I ask the questions here! We would like some information. You’d better come with me.”

“Only if you let go of me.”

“Okay. But don’t you dare leave. It would do you so much harm.”

Jupiter had almost got used to this kind of threat. He decided not to take the chance and to follow Tashi for now. There was nothing else left for him to do either. And despite all the danger, maybe he could get a little further and find out more about the people behind this mysterious game.

After Tashi searched Jupiter for weapons, the man pulled out a mobile phone and had a short conversation in a language Jupiter did not understand.

“Come with me!” he then ordered and directed Jupiter into a side street. Tashi didn’t say a single word to Jupiter. After a few minutes, they reached St Anne’s Square. Jupiter pinched his lower lip thoughtfully.

Here stood the rock fountain where Pete was to deliver the box. That could hardly be a coincidence. Maybe this Tashi Yudron was the caller and not the knife thrower. The man pointed to a hotel.

With a mixture of curiosity and fear, Jupiter walked on as directed. More and more, he had the feeling that he would soon come to an understanding of the mystery of the small reddish-brown box. But he had to be vigilant.

Tashi led him around the hotel and pushed him into the backyard. Shortly, they both entered the hotel through the delivery entrance.

“What is this?” cried Jupiter. Slowly he lost his calm. “Where are you taking me?”

“We just need to talk to you,” Tashi replied and pushed him on.

They had come into a dimly lit corridor. Jupiter stumbled over a mountain of dirty towels which had apparently fallen out of a specially designed shaft. Tashi feared that Jupiter wanted to escape and grabbed him so tightly by the arm that the pain ran through the boy’s limbs.

“Stop it!” Jupe cried.

“You will do only what I tell you to do,” Tashi said.

They reached a lift and Tashi pushed the button. A few seconds later, the lift doors opened and Jupiter was pushed roughly into the cabin. It then went to the third floor. They got out and turned right. Jupiter slowed down his pace. He had long since ceased to be sure whether it had been wise not to have attempted escape.

Tashi pushed him into the side. “Hurry up! One false move and you will see stars!”

The man stopped Jupe when they reached Room 317. Without taking his eyes off Jupiter, he knocked. A short time later, the door was opened from the inside. Tashi Yudron let Jupiter go in first. The First Investigator couldn’t help but stare at the man standing in the room in amazement for a moment. He had been prepared for some things, but he had not expected this sight.

The man looked like a Buddhist monk. His long, maroon and yellow robe was made of fine cloth and from his weather-beaten face, he looked at Jupiter calmly and dismissively.

“So you took our box,” the man said calmly.

“One of them,” Tashi said before Jupiter could answer. “The other two escaped with the box. But if we have this guy here, we’ll get the box back.”

“Would you like to say something?” asked the monk.

When Jupiter was silent, the monk cleared his throat and said: “You are right. I should introduce myself first. My name is Jampa Rapten. I am a monk and also a companion and adviser to His Holiness Lama Geshe from Tibet. We are with a small Buddhist contingent who is staying in Rocky Beach for a few days.”

“A Buddhist lama?” Jupiter asked. “Here in Rocky Beach?”

Buddhists—as far as Jupiter understood—were mainly in Asia, where this religion had its origin. Buddhism, so he had learned, was one of the major world religions. There were several schools of thought but what they all had in common was that followers sought the path to enlightenment.

“Yes. Lama Geshe is currently the spiritual leader of the Kathu school of Tibetan Buddhism. Tashi and I travel with him as his advisers—and as his protectors,” Jampa said.

“And the lama is the head of your religious school?” Jupiter probed.

“Yes. After our previous leader, the Great Lama Sungaya passed away about a year ago, the most senior member of our school is Lama Geshe, and he is now our leader,” Jampa explained.

“And Kathu is a region in Tibet? ... So that means that you are located in the Himalayas—the highest mountain range in the world,” Jupiter remarked.

“That’s right,” Jampa said. “But now tell me who you are.”

“Jupiter Jones,” the First Investigator said. How much was he to tell the Buddhist monk about their story without making a mistake? First of all, he had to straighten something out.

“My friends and I did not steal the box—at least not intentionally. I can’t deny that it was in our possession or perhaps still is. It fell into our hands by accident.”

Jampa looked at him. “I want to explain to you that for you, the content of the box is completely meaningless... but for us, it is very valuable.”

“So the box belongs to you?” Jupiter wanted to confirm.

The monk nodded. “It is the property of the lama. We must get the box back, and we must get it by this evening.”

Jupiter wondered if that was really the case, then the lama should get his property back... but Jupiter remained sceptical. Could he believe the monk just like that? He had to know more first. Besides, Pete was forced to deliver the box to this mysterious caller by 6 pm otherwise he was in great danger. Jupiter thought that he’d better not tell Jampa Rapten about this for now. He had to keep the situation open.

“If you let me go, I will do everything I can to clear this up,” he promised Jampa ambiguously.

The monk breathed out slowly. “Let me think about it.”

Tashi said something in his language. It sounded angry and Jampa answered him in English so that Jupiter could understand it: “Tashi! This boy should get the chance to save the situation. He will bring the box back to me. I am sure of it!”

Tashi made a throwing gesture and turned away angrily.

“You must excuse Tashi Yudron,” Jampa said. “Maybe he was a little too rough on you. But His Holiness, our lama and religious leader, is being threatened. When we travel overseas, we have to be exceptionally careful. Tashi Yudron is absolutely trustworthy. He is our best man—and that’s why the lama brought him here.

“But now please tell me the whole story. How did you get the box in the first place? And most importantly, where is it?”

“There’s not much to say.” Jupiter reported that Pete had found the box at the warehouse and had since been followed by a man with knives.

Jampa nodded meaningfully to Tashi. “That was Dawa, the agent,” he muttered. “He is also known as ‘Dave’.”

Dave—so that was the name of the knife thrower, and the Kathu people knew him. Jupiter continued unperturbed as if he hadn’t heard the name: “This old warehouse building was certainly not the intended storage place for such a valuable thing! So the box must have been stolen earlier!”

The monk nodded thoughtfully. “Your assumption is correct. The box was stolen right here in this very room! And to make matters worse, it happened when I was here!”

Jupiter looked up in amazement. “If the theft really happened when you were here, then you must know who the thief was!”

Jampa smiled. “Yes and no. Sometimes something happens in front of your eyes and you don’t see it.” He remained mysteriously silent and approached a small dresser which stood at the side of the room. On the dresser was a reddish velvet fabric. It looked like a small altar, but there was nothing on it.

“The box was placed here,” said Jampa. “But then the unbelievable happened. Tashi was out checking some places for safety, so I took over the guard. The lama stays in the next room.” Jampa pointed to a connecting door that Jupiter had already noticed. It was ajar.

“His Holiness meditated there this morning as he does every morning. After the long two-hour meditation, he regularly drinks a bottle of clear water. I ordered it. The waiter came and brought the water on a tray. I greeted the man and took the water from him. Then I turned around, opened the bottle and poured out a bit to take a sip. If you must know, it is for safety

reasons that Tashi or I will taste any drink before giving to the lama. The waiter then left. So far, everything was fine.” He paused. “Then after maybe two or three minutes, there was another knock. I opened the door, and there was another waiter standing there—with a tray and a bottle of water.”

“I understand,” Jupiter interrupted him. “The first waiter was a fake. He sneaked in before the actual waiter came. He expected you not to pay attention to him. When you turned away, he quickly snatched the box and disappeared. A very simple trick. Very effective, though not without risk. The culprit had very little time before the actual waiter came, and he had to have his nerves in order to do it.”

Jampa Raptan looked at him in astonishment. “I am impressed... You analyze and think so fast!”

Jupiter smiled. In his thoughts, he was already one step further. “Mr Jampa, you mentioned a man named Dave. Could he be the waiter in disguise?”

“Dave is a man with a thousand faces,” Jampa said thoughtfully. “But since I’ve never seen him face-to-face, he wouldn’t even need a disguise.”

Suddenly Jupiter felt the atmosphere in the room change. A tension, but not an unpleasant one, filled the air. Jupiter turned around and saw that the connecting door to the next room was now completely open.

He looked into the calm face of the lama who stood at the doorway.

8. The Vision

“Is that the boy?” the lama asked and waved his hand closer to Jupiter.

As if magically attracted, Jupiter stepped to him. “Yes, Mister, uh, sir... Your Holiness...”

“Come in, I want to ask you something,” the lama said.

Tashi became restless. “Should I come as well? We don’t know this boy.” He took two steps forward and tried to grab Jupiter’s arm but Jampa pulled him back. Then Jampa stopped and turned to Lama Geshe. “Would you like Tashi or me to join you?”

Lama Geshe smiled and shook his head. “This is not necessary.” He stepped aside so Jupiter could enter. He entered a warm, darkened room.

“I’ve rested,” said the lama. He went to the window and drew the curtains. The pale light of the day fell in. The storm was stronger than before. Lama Geshe stopped at the window for a moment and looked outside. “I thought the sun always shines in California,” he said, turning to Jupiter and smiling.

“The California sunshine is a cliché, just as it is a cliché that Buddhist monks are calm and composed,” Jupiter replied.

The lama understood immediately. “You are talking about Tashi,” he said. “Please excuse him. He is under tremendous pressure in the current situation we are facing. He protects me, but sometimes he has to fight back.”

Jupiter left it at that and let his eyes wander through the large but not lavishly furnished hotel room. The monks had brought some relics that they had placed in certain parts of the room. Jupiter discovered a shell-like object and came closer. “It’s a *dung-dkar* or conch shell,” said the lama. “We use it for ceremonies.”

Jupiter’s gaze wandered further through the room and caught hold of a silver bell-like object pointed at the top.

“This is what we call *chorten*. The symbols on the sides ward off evil spirits. The ashes of the Great Lama are inside.”

Jupiter swallowed. “The ashes?”

The lama smiled. “For us, this is something quite common. Death is part of the ‘Wheel of Life’. We are not afraid of the ashes of the deceased because their consciousness and energy are reborn and live on... But wait, I forgot one thing...”

Lama Geshe stepped to a dresser and picked up a silk scarf. Then he stepped towards Jupiter and put the scarf around him. “This scarf is called *khata*. With this, we welcome our guests. Now you are welcome, and you are my guest.”

Jupiter bowed respectfully as a gesture of thanks. Suddenly a gust of wind whipped the rain against the window panes.

The lama looked outside. “I had a vision before coming here,” he said. “Lightning flashed out of the sky... A secret was stolen... It was said that I would suffer a loss and learn a bitter truth. At that point in time, I knew that our religion was in danger.”

“You foresaw the theft?” Jupiter asked in astonishment.

“That’s how you can interpret it,” the lama said.

“But not exactly...” Jupe said.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, perhaps you didn’t know that your box was stolen while you were meditating.”

The lama shook his head. “Unfortunately, visions are not that clear. No, that’s what I call a bad coincidence. I had no idea that shortly before the end of my meditation, Jampa would bring me back into the here and now with this terrible message... but I do not blame anyone. Jampa sat alone in the next room the whole time... and Tashi was away.”

“Where was Tashi?”

“He was at the Buddhist Centre. Tonight we’ll have a ceremony there.”

But Jupiter’s thirst for knowledge was far from satisfied.

“What is meditation like? I mean, how does it work... Are you here all alone? And what do you do during that time? ... Think?”

“Well, that’s a lot of questions. When I meditate, I concentrate completely on one object or one thought. Little by little, the flood of distracting fears and ideas disappears. My senses lose contact with my immediate surroundings. It’s as if the space is no longer here.”

“And how do you find your way back? I mean, how do you wake up from meditation?”

“If you practise for long, you can steer yourself during meditation. I decide where I go and when I get out.” He cleared his throat and added with a sigh. “But as meaningful as meditation is, it won’t bring the box back.”

“We would love to get the box back for you, so we all could have some peace and quiet. I don’t know what Mr Jampa has told you, but I can assure you that we have nothing to do with the theft from your hotel here. My friend Pete found the box in an old warehouse building and we have been followed ever since. I’d really like to know what kind of story we got ourselves into.” Jupiter took a breather. “But I’d much rather have a clue as to how to get us out of this situation with our skin intact.” His tone had remained moderate. Actually he had wanted to react much more angrily, but the presence of the wise man calmed him down.

“Perhaps it would help you if I told you that several people are after the box,” the lama said calmly, “out of self-interest and lust for power... but let’s sit down first.” He pointed to a lounge area with red chairs. Jupiter accepted the offer.

Lama Geshe took two glasses and looked at Jupiter questioningly. “Water?”

Jupiter nodded. “Sure. Thank you, but I can pour it myself.”

“You are my guest,” the lama said and handed him a filled glass. Then he moved a chair and sat down on it.

“What is your name?” Lama Geshe asked.

“Jupiter Jones. I live here in Rocky Beach. Actually, it was about a movie we were making for a school project. When my friend Pete was checking out the warehouse, he happened to see the box there.”

“Maybe it’s even good that your friend took the box,” the lama said. “Maybe he saved it by taking it.”

“I hope Pete still has it. Then we would...” He faltered. He wanted to promise Lama Geshe he would give the box back to him, but he could not. It was up to Pete, and he probably had no choice but to put the box where he was told to do at 6 pm. Hopefully, they could see who picked it up and start the pursuit. So it might work out after all.

The monk had watched Jupiter closely. “You haven’t told me everything,” he said. “If I can help you, I’d like to do it.”

Jupiter squirmed. Did it make sense to involve the lama in his conflict? As sympathetic as the lama was to him, Jupiter decided to give the conversation another direction. Maybe he could get more information from him. Hadn’t Jampa claimed that the contents of the box were of no use to outsiders?

"I suspect that there is no money, gold or jewellery in the box," Jupiter said. "It must be something else—something much more important."

"You have a sharp mind," Lama Geshe replied with a smile and remained silent.

"You said earlier that your religion was in danger," Jupe continued.

The lama nodded.

"I hope that you can tell me what this is about so that I can help you."

"It's very simple," said Lama Geshe. "Bring me back the box. As long as you do not know what the box contains, its contents are meaningless to you, even if they may be a great treasure for us. That may be the best way to put it."

"I believe you don't quite trust me yet," Jupe said.

The lama looked at him. "Yes, I think I can trust you... even if you haven't told me everything."

"What's in the box?" continued Jupiter undaunted. "A message? A piece of information?"

"You can be very persistent, Jupiter." His eyes flashed when he noticed from Jupiter's reaction that this was not the first time he had heard it. Then the lama's gaze toned down.

"I can tell you something," he said a few breaths later. "It's a verse. Listen:"

*What is born will die,
What has been gathered will be dispersed,
What has been accumulated will be exhausted,
What has been built up will collapse,
And what has been high will be brought low.*

He closed up and took a break. "It is a saying from the Buddha. My teacher, the late Lama Sungaya gave it to me on the occasion of my ordination. It was a long time ago."

"Gave you in what way?" Jupiter asked, to keep the lama talking.

"The ordination is a very important occasion for me. Many ceremonies were held. Each of my teachers selected a verse for me and wrote it on a piece of paper. These pieces of paper were for my eyes only and should guide me in my new task. I read them and then threw them into a big fire that had been lit for the celebration... at least that's the way in our tradition."

Jupiter nodded. He had the feeling that Lama Geshe was telling him a secret, but the lama spoke as simply and normally as if two friends were talking.

"The verse says that everything will pass," said Jupiter.

"That's how you can interpret it. Basically, it says that everything is impermanent. You can also understand it as everything changes and returns." He laughed. "But I'm not giving you a Buddhist teaching now. I think you would want to go back to your friends. I want to let things take their course. Decide as you see fit."

The lama was getting up when he thought of something else. "All I ask of you is this—if you find the box, do not try to open it, not just because of the secret... Lama Sungaya has—"

"It comes from Lama Sungaya?" exclaimed Jupiter in surprise.

The lama nodded. "Well, what I can tell you is... Lama Sungaya gave it to me just before he died."

"Sorry I interrupted you, Your Holiness," Jupiter apologized. "Surely you were about to inform me that the box was secured. We have already been warned—on the third failed attempt to open it, the box will destroy itself."

"Has anyone tried to open the box yet?" the lama asked.

“As far as I know, there was one attempt. Perhaps someone else might have tried it since then... I hope not.”

“I was meant to open the box at a specific date and time,” said Lama Geshe.

The lama looked at Jupiter and the First Investigator sensed without further words that he had just been given the task to find the box.

Jupe nodded. “Can you tell me when you need the box?”

“The moment the sun goes down,” Lama Geshe replied, “... today.”

He reached into his robe and carefully took out a small red string in a loop with a knot and gave to Jupiter. “This is for you,” said the lama. “It will bring you blessings. I can also offer you a piece of advice... You will know what to do and when to do it. Your intuition and wisdom will guide you. Then things will turn out the way it is supposed to be.”

Then he stood up slowly. The conversation was over.

“You haven’t told me everything,” Jupiter insisted.

“I have told you more than you realize,” the lama replied with a smile. “By the way, in my vision, there was a young man who helped me.”

Jupiter stood up and confusedly put the little red string into his pocket. They walked to the door together. Jupiter paused before opening it. “Your Holiness... in your vision, how did it end?”

“There was a rainbow at the end,” Lama Geshe said, looking at Jupiter. Then he smiled and let him go.

9. A Visit to Lesley

The First Investigator also said goodbye to the other monks, and then he left the hotel. Now he had to get to Pete and Bob again as soon as possible.

The conversation with Jampa and especially that with the lama had given the clues that Jupiter had hoped for all along. Presumably Dave had stolen the box and later wanted to give it to some dubious figure in the old warehouse or sell it. The monks had called Dave an 'agent'. This was open to many interpretations.

Everything revolved around a secret that concerned these Buddhist monks. Jupiter couldn't shake the feeling that Lama Geshe had given him more pointers than he had realized. He decided to go over the conversation with the lama in his mind once he was back with Pete and Bob. Hopefully they had heard his hint when Tashi had caught him. Jupiter had shouted 'Lesley!' to them.

Lesley Dimple was a sales assistant at Booksmith, a small book store in downtown Rocky Beach. The book store had a splendid range of old and rare books about Rocky Beach and many other subjects. Lesley had been involved in a couple of previous cases of The Three Investigators, and she was in good terms with them, especially Bob.

Jupiter had assumed that their headquarters was being watched and he had to come up with another meeting place at lightning speed, with a keyword that only The Three Investigators knew. He had meant for Pete and Bob to meet at Booksmith.

In the meantime, Jupiter saw another advantage of his idea. In the book store, they would get further clues about the mysterious case. The books at Booksmith were a real treasure trove for curious people.

But while Jupiter was going down in the lift, he had another thought. Why shouldn't he take the opportunity to search a little for the disguised waiter who stole the box? It was possible that he was the stranger who had arranged to meet the dangerous knife thrower named Dave at the warehouse.

When Jupiter arrived on the ground floor, he went to the reception. A man who was sitting behind the counter looked up. "Yes?"

Jupiter nodded at him as a greeting. "You heard about the theft in Room 317?"

The man leaned back. "Of course. But what have you got to do with it?"

"Nothing," Jupiter reassured him. "The Buddhist monks told me. I've just visited them. The thief was probably dressed as a waiter."

"He used our uniform, yes. At least the clothes have turned up... in the garbage chute, down in the yard."

"The thief threw away the clothes while fleeing?" Jupiter asked.

"Looks that way. From the courtyard, you can get to the street unseen. And the guy rode a bike getting away."

"And you didn't notice that fake waiter?" Jupiter probed further.

"No. You don't have to pass the reception desk here to go to the courtyard. The thief probably took the lift from the third floor to the basement."

Jupiter knew the way. Tashi had brought him into the hotel through this back entrance. He drew breath for the next question but the man beat him to it: "That's enough now! Why

are you asking about this? I have already told Mr Tashi everything. He can give you all the information you need.”

“Yes, yes. Thanks.” Jupiter was about to leave, but he turned around. “Did Mr Tashi report the theft to the police?”

“You can ask him about that too.”

Grumpily, Jupiter withdrew. He would have liked to get more information although Tashi seemed to have taken care of everything already as that was his task. On the other hand, where had Tashi been during the time of the theft? Was he really to be trusted?

Jupiter looked down the street, thought for a moment and then jumped into a bus that took him to the book store.

When Jupiter entered the book store, a man stood with his back to the front door and was looking at the shelf with the rare old books. No one else was in the shop—not Lesley, not Pete, not Bob.

The man turned around briefly and Jupiter involuntarily flinched. An Asian. So what? There were many Asians in America. Was he already paranoid?

At that moment, Lesley poked her curly brown head through a sliding door to see who had entered the shop.

When she discovered Jupiter, she smiled. She waved him over, then she turned to the man and said: “Mr Zhang, if you need any help, just let me know, okay?”

“Why, yes, Miss Dimple. You’re very kind. Thank you very much.” Mr Zhang looked up for a moment and returned to the books on the shelf.

Jupiter slipped through the door and entered the packing room.

Bob and Pete sat on the packing table between parcels, strings and adhesive tape and chewed on two sausage rolls happily. Pete had put the video camera beside him. There was no trace of the box.

“Hi, Jupe!” mumbled the Second Investigator, as if Jupiter’s appearance was the most natural thing in the world. “There’s a sandwich left for you here. There’s even a—”

Bob interrupted and handed Jupe the sandwich. “Lesley got it for you. Tell us, what happened?”

“Thanks for asking,” Jupe replied, “but I guess you weren’t worried at all.”

“What should we have done? After that guy got you, we were gonna go after him. We would never let you down, even though we know you can get your head out of the noose by yourself! Unfortunately, we had some trouble with a certain knife-throwing surprise guest,” Pete said.

“Out of nowhere, that guy just appeared,” Bob chomped at his sandwich.

“He wanted to take the box from us again,” Pete continued. “But we are not so easily tricked! He nearly caught me, but I quickly threw the box to Bob.”

“Unfortunately, that meant that the guy ran after me and I threw the box back to Pete,” Bob grinned.

“And then I spotted the bus to Los Angeles,” Pete said triumphantly. “I just about jumped in, but the knife thrower couldn’t make it. Man, he must have been mad! I went a bit out of town and I took another bus back to Rocky Beach. I haven’t been here long.”

“I got here first,” Bob explained, smiling at Lesley. “Putting Booksmith up as a meeting place was a good idea of yours, Jupe! Lesley didn’t just spoil us with sandwiches, she released her boss’s cola stash.”

Lesley winked at him. “As long as you don’t drink the whole case.”

“Where is the box?” Jupiter asked.

Smiling, Pete picked up one of the parcels Lesley had packed. “In here. Tonight at 6 pm sharp, I’ll drop the box off at the arranged place and then all my troubles will be over!”

“Disguised as a parcel—not bad,” Jupe marvelled. “Just don’t put an address label on it.”

Bob wiped his hands on the napkin. “Right. We must not mix up the packages... But tell us what happened to you, Jupe!”

They did not need to keep secrets from Lesley so Jupiter gave a short account of how he had met Lama Geshe.

Lesley interrupted him: “So you met him, Jupiter? Wow! I read about the lama’s visit in the newspaper. The monks’ journey sounded very mysterious.” She frowned. “Mr Zhang, the customer outside, might know more,” she said. “Should I ask him in?”

Jupiter was not enthusiastic about her idea. “Thank you, Lesley, but we can’t trust anyone at the moment.”

“You don’t have to tell him exactly what it’s all about,” Lesley said. “Take the opportunity. He’s a scholar of religion, I think, and he buys a lot of books on Buddhism. He’s from China but has lived in Rocky Beach for years and is a respected customer here. I really think he has nothing to do with your knife thrower.”

Jupiter realized that his mistrust was not justified. “All right,” he gave in with a side glance at Pete and Bob, “but only if I do the talking... otherwise, someone else might slip up.”

Pete and Bob looked at each other. “When he is around, it would be a wonder if he trusts us to do something,” Pete whispered.

Lesley went out to the shop and Jupiter saw through the crack of the door as she exchanged a few words with Mr Zhang. He put his book aside and took a glance at the packing room door. Jupiter quickly pulled his head back.

10. Rebirth

A minute later, Mr Zhang entered the packing room. He was a finely dressed gentleman, about fifty years old. Hesitantly, he looked around. "Ah, so these are your friends who are interested in Buddhism?" He approached them with a smile.

Jupiter watched him closely. Mr Zhang looked friendly, but could he really be trusted? Reluctantly, the First Investigator took the floor. "Yes, Mr Zhang, we are friends of Lesley Dimple. I'm Jupiter and these are my friends, Pete and Bob... Mr Zhang, we're studying Buddhism at school and Miss Dimple told us that there's a lama staying in Rocky Beach right now."

"Oh, yes!" Mr Zhang said and smiled. "That is Lama Geshe, the leader of the Kathu school of Tibetan Buddhism."

Lesley pulled out a chair for Mr Zhang and he sat down. "You're very kind, Miss Dimple."

Then he turned to Jupiter. "I was once given the great honour of speaking with Lama Geshe. But if it's your intention to meet him... uh... for your school work, I must disappoint you. He's not seeing anyone at the moment."

"Why?" asked Jupiter, although he already suspected the reason.

"Well, primarily, I guess, out of caution. A few conspirators are not very sympathetic to Lama Geshe. With support from abroad, they want to disempower him and take over the religious system of his school. It is similar to what happened in other parts of Tibet. Unfortunately, the religious leadership there is linked to politics."

"Then is the lama's life in danger?" Bob asked in between.

Mr Zhang smiled thinly and looked at him forcefully. "Perhaps more of his position as the religious leader. At the moment, Lama Geshe is in a very delicate situation. All power rests on him, but that can change again in a few hours."

"None of this means anything to me," Pete threw in impatiently. "First he has the power, then he doesn't."

Mr Zhang flinched briefly. Apparently, he thought Pete's interjection was rude. But he replied politely: "The lama is in Rocky Beach to sort out a succession issue."

"His successor?" Bob asked. "Is he sick?"

"Not his successor. A succession issue... Almost a year ago, the then spiritual leader of the Kathu school passed away. They called him the Great Lama and his name was Sungaya. After his death, the leadership temporarily passed to the school's most senior lama, who is Lama Geshe. He is now in charge of the monasteries and more importantly, the upholding and preservation of the spiritual tradition."

"What does that mean?" Bob asked.

"Well, in Tibetan Buddhism, the core teachings are preserved by being orally passed down through a lineage of masters—from one generation to the next," Mr Zhang explained. "The vital link through which the spiritual tradition is maintained is the profound connection between an enlightened master and the disciples. The Great Lama Sungaya was the principal lineage holder of the Kathu tradition."

"And you said that Lama Geshe is only the temporary leader?" Bob asked.

“It is best to imagine it as a transitional leadership. If the Great Lama’s rebirth is not proclaimed soon, the existence of the Kathu lineage will be threatened.”

Pete frowned. To him, all this seemed ever stranger. “Rebirth? What do you mean by that?”

“I guess you haven’t got very far with Buddhism in school,” Mr Zhang replied. It sounded more like a cutting remark than a mere statement. For the first time, Jupiter thought he heard a note of irony in Zhang’s voice.

“I think it was the day you were sick, Pete,” he quickly interjected. “That’s when we went through all this. Buddhism believes in the rebirth of living beings. Your body dies, but your consciousness is reborn in another body—and this goes on in cycles until you have reached your goal on the path of enlightenment. It means that if you follow the path, you will be reborn at an ever higher level until you finally reach the level of complete enlightenment.

“For those beings who have reached certain stages of the path of enlightenment, they can choose to be reborn again if they want to be teachers and show the way to other living beings. They do this out of compassion. In this respect, I believe, this was what the Great Lama Sungaya had set out to do—to continue his work.”

While Pete and Bob showed annoyed faces at the Juve’s lecture, Mr Zhang nodded his head contentedly.

“You know your way around, Jupiter,” he said appreciatively. “So you learned something at school after all. That’s more or less how it is... In many schools of Tibetan Buddhism, when the lineage holder of the tradition passes away, it is believed that he will be reborn as another person. That person, when found, will then become new leader.

“It is the responsibility of the senior lamas of the school to seek and find the next leader following the death of the incumbent. The process can take a long time and different schools have different methods. Sometimes it is done in accordance with the prophecies of an oracle.

“However, some leaders follow a tradition where, before he passes away, he would have an idea of his rebirth. Such is the Kathu lineage. Before the Great Lama passes on, he will have a vision as to when, where and which family he would be reborn into. He then writes this down and the information is kept a secret.

“After his death, this information can only be revealed and proclaimed at a certain date and time, in a certain place, during in a certain ceremony. Only in this way will he achieve what he set out to do in his next life. The astrologers of the school will calculate the exact date, time, and place for the ceremony to take place.

“Once the next incarnation of the Great Lama is found, the senior lamas of the tradition is charged with transmitting the core teachings to this next leader. It will take time for him to assume the spiritual leadership considering that he is usually identified when he is only a child.

“This is why this is so important to the followers of the tradition. It’s the succession process... and that is why Lama Geshe is here. The Great Lama Sungaya has died about a year ago and it’s about finding his incarnation,” Mr Zhang concluded.

Jupiter had followed the last sentences with extreme interest. What Mr Zhang reported fitted in wonderfully with what Lama Geshe had indicated and what he, Jupiter, had suspected.

“The astrologers have determined that the place for the proclamation is Rocky Beach!” Jupiter concluded. “And the day is today! At sunset, the ceremony shall take place here in our city!”

Mr Zhang was silent, then quickly said: “I think I’ve told you too much.” He laughed. “There’s a book in the front of the store that describes it all in detail. “It’s called *The History*

of the Kathu School of Buddhism.”

Lesley got up. “I’ll go get it,” she said and went out of the packing room.

Meanwhile, Jupiter wanted to know more from Mr Zhang. He poked Pete in the side. “Say, Pete. Do you still have that tag? The one we found?” Jupe asked. He was referring to the piece of paper that had hung on the box that had kept The Three Investigators so busy for several hours.

“Uh, yes, the tag...” Pete went through his trouser pocket, took out the piece of paper and handed it to Jupe.

“Here, look, Mr Zhang,” Jupe said. “Can you tell us what is written here?”

The Chinese man took the tag. When Mr Zhang saw the contents, he gave a surprised expression. “Where did you get this?” he asked.

Jupiter pondered for a moment. A white lie was certainly justifiable in this situation. “It was lying in St Anne’s Square—right in front of the hotel. Someone must have dropped it there.”

“That is the hotel where Lama Geshe is staying,” said Mr Zhang thoughtfully.

Jupiter could hardly keep his curiosity in check. “What do the words mean?” he asked. “Surely you can translate this?”

“Yes, it is written in Tibetan... and it’s a saying from the Buddha. I can give you a rough translation...” Mr Zhang paused seemingly looking for the right words. Then he hesitantly said:

*What is born will die,
What you have gathered will be scattered,
What you have collected will be consumed,
What you have built will collapse,
And what you have brought up will come down.*

Jupiter swallowed. He knew that—at least he had heard it earlier—from Lama Geshe, with slightly different wordings but they were basically the same. Why had Lama Geshe quoted this verse to him? But what was the significance of it?

At that moment, Lesley stepped inside again. In her hand was the book Mr Zhang had referred to.

“Great customer service! Thank you!” Mr Zhang said with a smile as Lesley gave him the book.

The scholar immediately started leafing through it. “In fact,” he muttered, proudly adding: “I had a hand in this book. I wrote the chapter on the beginnings of the Kathu lineage.”

He turned the pages. “Here you will also find a chapter giving a brief description of the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism. There are four major and more famous schools, but Kathu is a smaller school with fewer followers... And here are some historical photos...” His finger pointed to a page. “This is the Great Lama Sungaya as a child, shortly after his incarnation was identified by another high-ranking lama.” Jupiter bent over to take a look.

Mr Zhang turned to the next page. “Here’s another interesting photo!” The picture showed a young Lama Geshe at the ceremony of his ordination as a lama.

“That was in 1966,” Jupiter noted.

“Yes. Tibetans still use their calendar for religious purposes and events,” commented Mr Zhang, as if he had followed Jupiter’s thoughts. “For this, I mean the Tibetan lunar calendar,

which is similar to the Chinese one. There is a chapter on the calendar system in this book as well.”

Jupiter nodded and pointed to a person in the background of the picture. “Is this Lama Sungaya?”

“Yes, that’s him,” said Mr Zhang, and reverence resonated in his voice. “The Great Lama is shown here delivering his personal prayer to Lama Geshe. At an ordination ceremony, a new lama receives a prayer from each senior religious leader to guide him through life.”

Jupiter stared at himself. What was the connection? He was pinching vigorously on his lower lip. “Lama Geshe is a wise man,” he suddenly said.

“Yes,” confirmed Mr Zhang. “All these Buddhist religious leaders are very wise and experienced people. As I have had the honour of meeting some of them... I can say this first-hand.”

Jupiter did not mean that, but he preferred to keep silent. “Mr Zhang, we’re very grateful to you,” he said instead.

Surprised, the Chinese man raised his eyebrows. “Is that enough? But I’ve hardly said anything yet. The whole history of Buddhism, its philosophy...”

“Perhaps we should read this book first to understand the historical background of the religion,” Jupiter said diplomatically. “If you allow, we would be very happy to contact you again on another occasion.”

“Just as you like.” Mr Zhang stood up. A smile played around his mouth. “You can find me here in Rocky Beach. Here’s my business card. Get in touch if you need to know more for... your school work.”

With a smile that was hard to read, he handed Jupiter his card.

Pete waited until the shop door had closed, then he immediately said: “You almost threw him out, Juve! This nice man! And I could have played Mr Zhang the part from the video that contained the foreign conversation! Or did you suddenly not trust him any more?”

But Jupiter did not get the chance to reply.

Again the shop door opened. The Three Investigators immediately recognized the visitor by the hard clack of the shoe heels!

11. Three Cats in a Bag

Lesley took a look through the gap in the sliding door. “Well... that’s a strange fellow,” she said in surprise. “I can’t imagine him wanting to buy a book here.”

“Let’s get out of here quickly, fellas,” hissed Jupiter. “May I take this with me?” He turned to Lesley and pointed to the book *The History of the Kathu School of Buddhism*. Lesley nodded.

Jupe clamped the book under his arm and stared at the book packages Lesley had packed. Which one was the one with the reddish-brown box? Jupiter heard the footsteps of the visitor. The knife thrower came closer. The First Investigator quickly grabbed the only package without an address label.

He saw from the corner of his eye how the sliding door was slowly opened from the outside. Now it was time. Lesley, who was standing right next to the door, backed away. “The back door,” she whispered.

Jupiter nodded and turned on his heel. Nervously, Pete held the door to the courtyard open for his friends. Then Bob rushed past Pete.

Lesley turned and froze. The guy in the long coat flashed a knife and gave Lesley a cold look. Then the man squinted his eyes together and took aim. Lesley held his breath. The knife barely whizzed past her. With a sharp ‘thud’, it got stuck trembling in the back door. The door had fallen shut just in time.

The knife thrower uttered an angry cry. With a powerful kick to one of the chairs, he cleared his way and ran past Lesley towards the back door.

Outside, it had started raining again. Jupiter breathed as shallowly and silently as possible. He was paralyzed with fear. With a quick glance at Pete and Bob, he signalled to his friends that the knife thrower was close on their heels. Jupe directed his friends towards the storeroom where Mr Smith, the owner of the book store, had kept mainly brochures and old books.

There was a stack of cardboards leaning against the storeroom wall a short distance from the door. Thick drops of water splashed onto the already softened cardboard. As best as they could, The Three Investigators pressed themselves against the wall and used the cardboards to provide them with the much-needed cover.

Jupiter wanted only one thing—the knife thrower to run out into the street as quickly as possible and ignore the pile of cardboards.

But their pursuer was not so easily tricked. The click of his heels wandered through the yard. Apparently, the man was planning to look for possible hiding places. First, he looked behind the rubbish bin, which he pushed aside with a scraping sound. A few moments later, the man suddenly appeared very close by, right at the door to the storeroom. He hurriedly checked and found that the door was locked.

If he now turned his gaze to the left, he would see them. Jupe no longer dared to breathe. But after the man had rattled the door strongly, he turned around and left. He simply left through the back gate as if he had given up looking. Apparently the thought had got the better of him that the three boys had decided to flee out to the street. That’s what Jupiter had

actually hoped from the start. He pushed his head forward a little and could see the knife thrower stop by the road and turn right. Then he had disappeared from Juve's field of vision.

"Whew!" Juve muttered and stretched his legs, which had already started to tingle. "That was close."

Bob pushed a floppy cardboard aside and stood up. Only Pete did not move from the spot. "I would count to a hundred before coming out," he suggested. "Better safe than sorry."

Jupiter nodded and looked at his watch. When the man still hadn't returned after three minutes, The Three Investigators ventured outside carefully. They took a look down the street. There was no sign of the wiry man in the grey coat.

"Let's get out of here," Jupiter suggested. They walked a few steps further and stopped in front of a CD shop.

"Now what?" Pete asked. "We can't stay here. The guy could show up at any moment!"

Jupiter looked at his watch again. It was approaching 4 pm. "Where can we spend the next two hours? At Headquarters?"

"That guy will find us right away," speculated Pete. "We could stop by Rent-'n-Ride, but he could still pick up our trail."

Bob nodded. "But I don't think we should walk around town for two hours. The man can go very fast on his motorcycle. Rocky Beach isn't that big."

"I also urgently need a few minutes to learn about the Kathu tradition in peace," explained Jupiter, holding up the book he had borrowed from Lesley. "If necessary, we'll go to some café and you keep watch."

"We almost got stabbed by a knife thrower and all you can think about is to read a book?" Pete said. "Well, maybe you can read about what I will be reborn as if I don't survive the day!"

"As a chicken." Jupiter coughed. "Sorry, that wasn't very appropriate." He looked in all directions. "No Pete, I have an idea..."

"Which once again you will refuse to share with us," Pete complained.

"I'm not sure," Juve said. "I don't want to embarrass myself."

"That's the reason? I think you want to be the great show-stopper again! But not at my expense. After all, it's my life that's at stake."

"Why don't you two stop arguing?" Bob intervened. "We're not getting anywhere like this. So where are we going? One of those beach cafés? ... Then let's turn left, it's the shortest way..."

Suddenly he stopped and grabbed Pete's arm. "Oh no! The knife thrower! He is waiting for us!"

Now the others saw him too. When the knife thrower realized The Three Investigators had seen him, he ran. Like rookies, they had fallen into his trap. But the detectives had no time to be annoyed with themselves.

"Step on it!" cried Jupiter.

The three boys ran for their lives. They still had enough of a head start. The passers-by swerved and looked at them in annoyance.

"Stop staring! Help us!" Jupiter thought to himself. But nobody did anything. Instead, a man bumped into him that made him almost dropped the parcel he was holding in one hand. With the other, he had clasped the book on Buddhism.

Jupiter was not the fastest anyway, but these handicaps made him even slower. He saw that Pete and Bob were already quite a distance ahead of him, and was about to let out a cry for help when suddenly the brakes of a car squeaked beside him.

A brand-new red Ford stopped. Someone bent over the passenger seat and pushed the side door open. Jupiter involuntarily backed away. Only after a moment of shock did he realize who had stopped next to him.

“Skinny Norris! You rascal,” he cried.

“Get in, fatso,” Skinny shouted happily to him from inside the car.

Jupe looked back. The knife thrower swerved swiftly around an advertising stand, unerringly reaching into his coat. A few more steps and he would be there.

One thing was clear to Jupiter—he hated Skinny Norris even more than he hated the dentist, but it was a thousand times better to get into the car with him than to be stabbed by the projectiles of the knife thrower. On the spur of the moment, the First Investigator accepted Skinny’s invitation. As soon as he got into the car, Skinny locked the doors.

In barely one second, the knife thrower reached the side of the car. Angrily he tugged at the passenger door and tried to open it. But he did not succeed.

Grinning, Skinny Norris stepped on the accelerator.

Jupiter took a breath and turned around. He saw how the pursuer with the knife in his hand became smaller and smaller—a picture that did him extraordinary good. Then when he looked ahead, he saw Pete and Bob at about twenty metres away. They had stopped running, and were looking around searching for Jupe.

“Stop, Skinny! There’s Bob and Pete,” he cried.

“Just as Jupiter Jones wishes!” Skinny Norris had also seen the two detectives and stopped right next to them. He unlocked the doors and cried: “Get in, gentlemen!” followed by a dirty laugh.

“What are you doing with that scumbag?” Pete cried, as he and Bob were stunned seeing Jupiter in Skinny’s car.

“Just get in first!” Jupiter burst out. “We’ll sort it out later.”

As soon as Pete and Bob got in the back seats, Skinny locked the doors again and sped off. “Three cats in a bag,” he remarked with a smirk. “I guess you super-fun investigators are in trouble again?”

“Shut up, Skinny,” Pete snorted and put the seatbelt on. He slowly recovered from the surprise. “Hey, Skinny... After your last escapade, I thought we have seen the last of you. What made you want to show your face around here again?”

“Shut up, Crenshaw!” Skinny replied harshly. “What I do is none of your business.”

“What do you want from us anyway?” Pete continued unperturbed. “Normally, you’d rather let us drown a thousand times than save us!”

Skinny Norris did not answer. Pete stared hostilely at him.

Skinner was a little older than The Three Investigators and had been annoying and creating trouble for the three boys over the years. Yeah, it seemed like a hobby to Skinny—getting in the way of the three of them.

Also he was mightily proud of his outfits for some inexplicable reason. Even today, he wore an expensive shirt, but even the ostentatious brand label couldn’t distract from the fact that Skinny was an unlikeable guy. Pete thought that Skinny, with his long nose, looked like a crow, especially when he looked into his eyes.

In any case, The Three Investigators knew that Skinny’s sudden appearance in the scene couldn’t be anything good. As if to confirm this hunch, Skinny declared that any attempt to escape was pointless. “My rear child lock works. Suits you kids back there! Fat Uncle Jupiter won’t have to worry about you two.”

“Shut up, Skinny!” Jupiter said. “We think it’s really nice of you to help us, and we thank you very much. But now let us out, preferably at the next corner!”

Skinny made no attempt to brake and turned off into another street. “We’re going to drive around a bit more—just for your safety,” he said sweetly. “You are in good hands with E. Skinner Norris.”

“And where are you going?” Pete asked.

“Where nobody will bother us.”

12. Trapped in Little Rampart

Pete looked at his watch. It was a little after 4:30 pm. They had escaped the knife thrower, but now Skinny threatened to cancel the 6 pm appointment for them. It was like magic.

"How long will you drive us around?" Pete asked carefully. "I have an important appointment at six."

"Not anymore," Skinny explained and risked a daring overtaking manoeuvre.

"What you are doing to us is nothing but a kidnapping!" Jupiter remarked indignantly.

Skinny laughed. "I'd rather call it a rescue. But you've always been great at twisting words!"

"Skinny, there are three of us and only one of you!" Jupiter thought it was time to point that out, but Skinny wasn't deterred.

"Don't pee in your pants, fatso," he replied. "At least, not in my new car, please!" Skinny spotted a pedestrian who was crossing the street illegally and pressed the accelerator. Only with a daring jump could the man save himself.

Jupiter looked at Skinny Norris shaking his head. "I don't know what the bigger disaster is—you driving or we arguing with you." He opened the book on Kathu and started reading. "And you better slow down or I'm going to be sick." Undeterred, Skinny sped on.

Pete was silent and stared out the side window. Skinny's driving seemed aimless. After a while, they turned back onto the street where the book store was. But then Skinny suddenly turned decisively and steered past Rent-'n-Ride. Pete caught a glimpse of Bob's Beetle, which was still parked in the yard. Then Skinny Norris turned off again.

"Little Rampart," mumbled Jupiter, leafing through the book. "No wonder you live where the rubbish piles up."

"And this is what someone who lives in a junkyard tells me," Skinny replied with feigned indignation. The wind drove a cardboard box towards them and Skinny rolled over it. Then he drove his car in front of a large apartment building.

"I'm only giving you what you deserve!" Skinny turned off the engine. "So, stop reading, fatso! You wouldn't understand it anyway."

The First Investigator calmly closed his book. "I've finished reading what I wanted," he said.

"What are you reading there, anyway?"

"A book on Tibetan Buddhism, if this means anything to you..." Jupe grinned and replied ironically. "But please... I'll do my best to improve your knowledge, even though you are a bottomless pit. But now tell me what do you really want from us!"

"A super detective like you should know that by now!"

"Of course. You can't fool me. I just want to hear it from you."

"I'm happy to let you go first."

"After all, you rarely do this... All right, as you wish..." Jupiter cleared his throat.

"You drive an expensive new car, Skinny," he began. "You're a miserable show-off, but even you can't do it without money. You probably have a new job." Jupiter pointed to the floor of the passenger seat, where his feet had hardly found room between all kinds of objects. "Here's a video camera, a recording device. Skinny, I guess you've become one of

those sensationalist reporters who are always after a hot story to sell it to one of the TV stations for as much money as possible. And now you've discovered us on the run. You realized that we are in the middle of a case and you're just dying to get the story so you can sell it to your stations!" Jupiter took a pause for effect. "We're probably supposed to tell you everything now... but you'll have a long wait coming."

For a moment, Skinny was silent and impressed. "Okay, okay," he said. "Nice of you to get right to the point. I bailed you out and now tell me what's going on. Who was that creepy guy I saved you from? What's he doing throwing knives around in the middle of Rocky Beach? It's about that package you're carrying, isn't it? Come on, tell me what's in it. Stolen jewels?"

"Banknotes," Jupiter said dryly. "From a robbery."

Bob and Pete could not wipe off a smile.

Skinny smiled uncertainly. "Well, show it to me!"

"No," Jupiter replied promptly. "It needs a secret code from the Bank of England. Also, this package is wired with explosives."

"You fat idiot!" Now Skinny was sure that the First Investigator was pulling his leg. "Let's do it differently!"

He turned on his car's ignition and honked the horn several times. Suddenly, the street became crowded. It was teenagers who lived in Little Rampart and who controlled the streets there. First there were three, then four, and soon there were a dozen.

So that's why Skinny had appeared so snotty. He was hoping for support! Probably he had already done one or the other thing with his friends. Bob knew some of the guys. They were *Los Ramones*, the only but dreaded street gang in Rocky Beach.

They gathered around the car and pulled open the doors. The Three Investigators had to get out, for better or worse.

"Hello friends," cried Skinny, who had also got out of the car. "Get the package off the three kids!"

"Since when do you have a say?" one of the teenagers said to him.

"You think because you put us on TV, you're Mr Cool huh?" A boy in a yellow T-shirt came forward. He seemed to be the leader. He had his hands on his hips.

Scared, Skinny took a step back. "I thought you will help me. These three are detectives. You can't—"

The boy in the yellow T-shirt laughed and shook his dreadlocks. "Skinny! That TV report you did on us, you did a big number on it. We played the fools for your documentary and we kicked butts... But we didn't see one tired dollar. You're starting from scratch, Skinny. We'll think twice about which side we're on."

Another member of the group nodded in agreement, pointed to Bob and shouted: "I know that one. He's all right."

"You see, Skinny," said the leader. "It's 50-50. So, what's going on? What are you up to now?"

Skinny Norris reacted with lightning speed. He approached Jupiter and tore the package from his hand. "They stole this from me," he shouted and began to tear open the paper.

The Three Investigators looked at Skinny in horror. But they did not dare to intervene. After a few seconds, the small reddish-brown box appeared. Skinny turned it around in amazement in his hands.

"That is ours," cried Jupiter. "Skinny, give it back now!" He threw himself on his arch-nemesis.

But the gang leader was quick. He jumped in, grabbed the box and held it triumphantly in the air. “Stop!”

The Three Investigators held their breath. The leader looked at Skinny and Jupiter. “Stay cool, guys. We’ll see what’s going on with the box! Hmm... a combination lock! With pictures and numbers.”

The leader took his time to turn the box around and checked out all the sides. Then he laughed and waved his people closer. “Hey guys! You know what we’re gonna do? We’ll have a contest—fat boy versus Skinny! Whoever cracks the combination, the box is his. That’s obvious! ... And I’m gonna make him shove it under his arm and get out of here!”

Jupe startled. As usual Skinny was bad news. As it was, nobody there knew the combination for the box, not to forget the security mechanism that would be triggered to prevent unauthorized access.

The leader looked around with a grin. “It’s cool, it’s fun. Who’s gonna make it? Bets are accepted. I’m betting... a dollar on the fat boy.”

Immediately, there were murmurs all around. The boys in the gang were voicing out their favourites. The bets on Skinny and Jupiter were more or less equal.

“But that’s not all,” the leader announced after noting the bets. “To make it a little more exciting, there’s a super prize for those who bet correctly!” Then he turned to Jupiter and Skinny. “At the back of the yard is a kick-boxing ring—our little training ground.” He smiled thin. His boys looked at him expectantly. “Those of us who bet right, get a fight... with the one who cannot open the box! All on one! And the rest will cheer them on! It’s gonna be so much fun!”

A consenting howl arose. The circle closed tighter around the four boys. Pete, Bob and Jupiter swallowed. Skinny Norris had suddenly turned very pale.

They wondered what would happen if neither of them got the box open.

13. The Combination Code

In a matter of seconds, Jupiter recalled all the facts. On the third failed attempt, the box would explode, he knew that much. Worthington had already tried it once. Provided no one else had given it another go, there was only one free try left as the third and final try had to be correct. Should he take the risk? Or was it better to disrupt the action and try to escape? If they lost the box, Pete would have a big problem—the handover at 6 pm would not be possible! It was all madness.

Jupiter looked around. Through the narrow circle of the boys there was hardly a way through. To think of escape was hopeless. Against *Los Ramones*, they simply had no chance.

The eyes of Jupiter and Skinny crossed. In Skinny's eyes, Jupiter detected something like panic. But also Skinny seemed to have sensed at that moment that Jupiter was uncertain. He reacted quickly.

"I'll try first," cried the arch-enemy of The Three Investigators into the tense silence. "Three tries." Apparently he saw chance as his only way out.

"Okay." The leader said and turned to Jupiter. "What do you think, tubby?"

Three tries and Skinny was to start? That would never work! Jupiter knew that the chance of getting the combination correct was 1:6000, so randomly getting it was almost impossible. That meant that Skinny won't even get to his third try as the box would have exploded by then. Juve had to think fast... really fast!

"I... I actually wanted to try first," mumbled Jupiter. "Let me try first!" Jupiter found it hard to keep his nerves. His idea was to get the two tries for himself, even though the last try would be at a severe risk.

But the leader shook his head. "You should have said that earlier."

Jupiter squirmed. He was trapped. At lightning speed, he played through all the possibilities again and suddenly... suddenly he recalled something. Immediately, Juve knew that it was imperative that he got to do the third and final try.

"Okay, I agree to let Skinny have the first go," he announced. "But I want to change the rules. Either you know the combination or you don't know! Therefore, I insist that each of us only get one shot at this!"

"All the more exciting! That's how to do it!" the leader remarked. "One try each..."

Since Skinny was to start first, Juve's 'one try' counter-proposal was the best he could muster. So now, Juve had to make the dicey third attempt. If he chose the wrong combination, the box would explode. This was probably not dangerous for him because the explosion would probably destroy the box itself and its contents. But Jupiter could not be sure.

The leader of *Los Ramones* walked up to Skinny Norris and put the box in his hand. "Skinny begins."

Jupiter pulled Bob's sleeve and whispered something in his ear. Bob nodded in surprise and pushed himself as inconspicuously as possible a few steps further until he came directly behind Skinny Norris.

"Let's go!" said the leader. "The show begins! Skinny, show us you didn't mean to mess with us. We want to see what's in the box!"

Skinny Norris smiled sheepishly. "I... I'm so excited," he stuttered. "I hope I'm not mixing up the combination."

"You only get one shot," the leader reminded him. "So get the combination right!"

The Three Investigators stared at Skinny Norris. In fact, everyone stared at Skinny Norris. He was sweating like a cheese in the blazing sun. It was obvious that he didn't have a clue about the combination.

"Would you like to step into the ring against us right now?" the leader asked hypocritically.

Skinny Norris looked helplessly around and waited for an inspiration. With shaky fingers, he tried his hand at the first dial.

"Hey, he chose a monkey," said the leader loudly, looking over his shoulder. "That fits him."

Skinny now had no ear for the cheeky remark and tried the next dial.

"A pile of wood," the leader said. The tension rose. No one made a sound.

'Seven' and 'nine' were his last choices.

Skinny put the box on the ground in front of him to slide the two buttons to release the latches. Unwillingly Jupiter took a step back. The boys of *Los Ramones* looked at Skinny's hands. Skinny looked up briefly, then with a sudden movement, he slid the buttons.

Nothing happened.

"I... I... must have mixed up something," Skinny called in an unusually high voice. "The box is mine! Believe me!"

A loud murmur rose and a few boys pushed themselves close to Skinny. The leader raised his hand reassuringly. "Skinny, this looks bad for you," he said. "Guess you can count your bruises tonight!"

"Better count the places that remain white," mocked one of the group members.

Jupiter took his heart and spoke up. "That's the end of the matter! The box is ours... for there is no other option. Please let us go!" It was worth a try.

But Skinny did not give in so quickly. "I bet fatso can't open the box either!" he said. His face regained colour. "Let him try it!"

"Of course, Skinny," he said. "We won't let you take the show away! If fatty fails too, we'll have twice the fun!" The leader took back the box and walked gracefully towards Jupiter.

Outwardly calm, Jupiter accepted the box. It was clear to him that the next attempt was the third and decisive one. It had to work if he wanted to save the box and himself... and ultimately Pete.

Pete and Bob's heart had gone down the drain. Jupiter's chances were just under 1:6000 and if he missed, the box would destroy itself—and worse than the inevitable fight with *Los Ramones* was that Pete would have to face the consequences for not being able to deliver the box as promised.

Despite the fear, Bob remembered what Jupiter had whispered to him. While everyone else was focussing on Jupiter, Bob squeezed himself close behind Skinny Norris.

In a firm voice, the First Investigator asked the audience to take a step back. Bob and Pete suspected why. The third failed attempt would trigger the explosion.

"You'll be disappointed as the box is empty!" Jupiter suddenly announced almost casually. "I don't know what Skinny suspects, but as beautiful as it is, it's just an old souvenir."

Pete and Bob looked at each other. Why did Jupiter tell all this? To buy time? It sounded like he was up to something.

“Don’t talk nonsense and get started,” the leader ordered. His gang was getting impatient. Jupiter nodded obediently, took the box and thoughtfully set the first symbol. He chose the ‘horse’. When the leader wanted to look over his shoulder, Jupiter flinched. “Please don’t. I’ll get all confused.” The leader pulled a face, but stepped aside.

Then Jupiter set the second character to ‘fire’. He cleared his throat.

“Well... yes. Now the first number.” Jupiter squinted his eyes together and moaned like it was hard work. He picked ‘one’.

Bob and Pete looked around for help. Slowly something had to happen. Wasn’t running away the better solution after all? Maybe a surprise attack might work. But for that, Jupe had to give the signal... but he did not seem to give any indication of that. Outwardly, he seemed completely calm. Finally, he turned the dial for the last digit. It stopped at ‘six’.

Now it all came down to it. Carefully, the First Investigator put the box on the ground. He raised his head and looked at the faces of the gang members. In a moment, he would have to slide the buttons. Bob raised his hands to his mouth in excitement. Now, if that was the wrong combination, they would go crazy. Hopefully Jupiter survived this unscathed.

Jupiter bent down carefully and stretched his arms fully to keep the greatest possible distance to the box. When he had put his thumbs on the buttons, he turned his head to the side as far as possible. His eyes were closed. He held his breath.

Bob closed his eyes. He didn’t dare breathe.

Finally, Jupiter slid the buttons...

14. On the Razor's Edge

Something clicked... but it was not a bang. It sounded more like a gun that wasn't loaded. Bob opened his eyes. The latches flipped up!

"Yeah!" Bob yelled and slapped Skinny Norris so hard on the back that Skinny tipped forward and tripped.

All the gang members turned to look at Skinny.

"You brainless idiot!" Skinny yelled and turned around. His eyes sparkled as he clenched his fists and walked threateningly towards Bob. The guys from *Los Ramones* jumped right in between them.

"You can fight later, Skinny!" their leader shouted mockingly. "Now we want to know what's in the box!"

The attention turned again to Jupiter. He had long since opened the box and lifted it up so that everyone could see the inside. "This is the proof," he announced with visible pride. "Just as I told you—it's empty!"

Bob and Pete stared into the velvet padded box. How had Jupiter known this? And what was the monks' treasure then?

Jupe then closed the box quickly, and moved the dials. Then he put the box in his jacket pocket. The First Investigator then pointed to his arch-enemy Skinny Norris, who looked as if his brand-new Ford had just been demolished. "He's looking forward to kickboxing."

"Watch out that you don't get a turn, fat boy," replied the leader of *Los Ramones*. "So get out of here before I change my mind!"

Skinny also tried to move.

"Stop, Skinny! You stay here!" the leader shouted, as the gang members held on to Skinny.

The Three Investigators winked at Skinny and ran away before *Los Ramones* had a change of mind. They walked slowly for the first few metres to keep their composure. It wasn't until they turned the corner that they started running—anywhere away from here.

The rain had stopped, but the wind was still blowing through the streets. By now it was 5:10 pm. The time of the handover was approaching and finally The Three Investigators were back on track.

"The best thing is not to let the time pass uselessly until six o'clock. We should come up with a plan on how we can expose and convict the blackmailing caller," Jupiter suggested when they had stopped again to catch their breath.

"Oh, yeah? A plan?" Pete shook his head. His enthusiasm for Jupiter's idea was limited. "I want to get rid of this thing as soon as possible. I'm getting tired of it. Besides, you remember very well—nobody but me is allowed to appear at the rock fountain!"

"I thought of the video camera," Jupiter replied. "If we cleverly position and adjust it, Bob and I will stay away, and you'll drop the box in the litter bin at 6 pm sharp."

"Just put it out of your mind, Jupe," Pete replied. "I'd be much more interested in how you got the box opened. That was very close to magic. And why was it empty?"

“Did you know the combination earlier?” Bob also felt that Jupiter had some explaining to do.

“Watch out,” Jupiter said and drew his friends to him. “We are very close to the place where Rubbish-George lives. Let’s rest there and settle all questions in peace.”

“Agreed. But it’s almost six,” said Pete with a glance at his watch. “Pass me the box. Only then will I feel better!”

With a slight reluctance, Jupiter took the box out and Pete put it in the back of his jacket, where the lining had recently been torn. Since then Pete has been using the opening as a secret pocket.

While they walked the few metres to the entrance, Pete looked at his watch almost continuously. Now nothing could really go wrong. There were only about 40 minutes left until the agreed time. That should be manageable.

All this back and forth around the box was a real pain. First he got hold of the box by chance, then it had disappeared, then it reappeared, but only to be as good as lost again. He felt that the box seemed bewitched. But now, The Three Investigators had all the trumps in their hands. Pete’s plan was very simple—serve the time until shortly before six and put the box into the litter bin on time.

They reached the entrance to the yard. If Pete had not been so lost in thought, he would have noticed the noise of a motorbike much earlier. Jupiter and Bob seemed to be in a similar predicament. Anyway, they were just as surprised when the red motorbike stopped in front of them with a sharp brake.

It was Dave—the man with the knife, whom they could never escape from.

“Finally, boys! I’ve been waiting for this!” he said.

There was only one possibility left for them. They could run through the gate to get help, but the yard was deserted. Neighbours could help if they were interested in what was happening, but in Little Rampart, nobody ever cared.

“We’re trapped!” Jupiter pointed out. “There’s only this one exit!”

“To Rubbish-George!” Bob yelled and ran. Behind them, the bike started howling. They still had a good lead. But only a few metres from George’s shack, Dave had caught up with them. He braked sharply and reached into his coat. A knife whizzed through the air. Trembling, it got stuck in a wooden panel of the shack. The Three Investigators flinched in horror and paused where they stood.

“That was only the beginning! Stand against the wall!” Dave was already holding another knife, pointing it at them. Carefully, The Three Investigators did as they were told and leaned back against the wood, side by side. There was no music inside the shack which seemed to indicate that George was not there.

Without taking his eyes off his victims, Dave got off his vehicle. He took a step forward and spun a knife through the air. With a sure grip, he caught it again. “Sharp, isn’t it? I can do it with two.” The man pulled out another knife so that he had one in each hand. With a jerk, he threw them up at the same time, and they rose to about one metre before whirling down again. Without even taking his eyes off The Three Investigators, Dave grabbed the knives from the air.

“I would advise you not to run away. I’ll get at least two of you. So don’t move.”

“How did you find us so quickly?” Jupiter asked. As impressive as Dave’s demonstration was, the First Investigator was determined to take the initiative.

Dave laughed. “Boy, I am a professional! I not only throw knives perfectly, I know every trick in the book! How do you think I found you guys at the book store? Fat boy, see if you can find something in your collar...”

Jupe looked at him in disbelief, but carefully took off his jacket. With his fingers, he felt the collar fabric. In fact, there was a little black button stuck there. Dave must have placed the transmitter there while he was in pursuit of Jupe. "Are you a secret agent or something?"

The man in the coat laughed and stroked the knife blades against each other. The sound made The Three Investigators' blood freeze in their veins. "You're one of the bright ones! And I always thought Californians were particularly stupid! So watch out—you're dealing with Dave! Dave lives in Los Angeles and he does a job now and then—for friends, for money. And Dave is always on his toes, if you know what I mean?"

"So I suppose this time, your employers might be from the land of your ancestors, right?" Jupiter asked.

"Wow, Mr Smarty Pants! What do you know about my ancestors, fat boy? Just because I got slanting eyes, you think I'm Asian? Huh? Is that what you think?" He flashed his knives and moved closer to Jupiter, who stepped aside carefully.

"Could be," he muttered.

"No, my boy," cried Dave. "I'm an American, just like you. My father's from Dallas, but my mother has Tibetan heritage. You're a smart boy, aren't you? But this time I'm after a little box. Come on, take it out! Which one of you three has it? Give it to me, and you'll be out of here, back in your dreamy little town, licking ice cream."

"And what about 6 pm? The meeting place at the fountain?" Pete asked into the blue.

"Forget 6 pm! And forget about the rock fountain! Give me the box now. I must have it! You're finally trapped, kid... after the way you mess with me at the warehouse with your... skates!"

"Search us then!" Jupiter shouted in between. "You won't find anything anyway."

They were still standing side by side on the wall, but Jupiter figured that they had better chances if things got moving. Most importantly, he had to get Dave away from Pete.

Dave took a few steps back. Now he stood in front of The Three Investigators like an animal trainer before the lions. Only in this game, the tamer was the predator and The Three Investigators were his victims.

"I know a much better way," Dave said. "I call it the truth of knives. It's a Dave invention."

Like lightning, he reached into his knife belt and barely a moment later, three knives rushed close to the bodies of The Three Investigators. The boys did not dare to move even a millimetre.

"Impressive, isn't it? You're particularly easy to hit, Mr Smarty Pants," Dave said and his gaze assessed Jupiter's massive stature. "My little knives will fly ever closer to you until they suddenly strike you lightly, and then... you will see how quickly you will agree with me... and you'll take the box out in no time."

Pete was sweating. The box pressed against his back from behind. Should he give it up willingly? Sooner or later, it would come to that.

"With your knife show, you could join the circus, Dave," cried Jupiter. "Just like Rubbish-George's great revolving door act. Remember that, fellas?"

"That's right!" cried Bob, who immediately took up the allusion. "Vanished without a trace! What an act!"

Dave dropped one of his knives beside him. "What are you talking about?"

But Pete had understood. He stood in front of the board that served as a revolving door in George's shack. And Rubbish-George had mentioned something about a second revolving door. Pete had to move only a bit to the left and let himself fall backwards, and he would be inside the shack. Carefully he put one foot to the side.

“Mister, I’m sorry to have to point this out, but someone is messing with your bike there!” cried Jupiter. Dave turned around briefly.

That split of a second was enough. Pete let himself fall backwards—and the door gave way.

15. The Rock Fountain

With a roll backwards, the Second Investigator landed in front of George's empty bed and immediately jumped to his feet. The revolving door was closed again. But where was the second revolving door?

It was a matter of seconds. Pete had to disappear before Dave stormed into the shack. Inside, there were only two exposed wooden walls. Pete threw himself sideways against the first. Nothing. Outside, Dave banged on the wood, looking for the spot where the door opened.

Pete tried the other side, and the board moved. He landed in a dark passageway as the door closed back. Pete heard Dave screaming outside.

The Second Investigator groped ahead as fast as he could in the dark. After a few metres, he bumped into a steel door. He opened it and stood in surprise in a stairwell. The stairs led up. Pete took three steps at a time. A few seconds later, he reached the street level.

He looked around and tried to orientate himself. He knew the street. One look at his watch—he had twenty minutes left. He had to get a plastic bag and to the fountain.

Pete ran down the block. Breathing heavily, he reached Meyers. He pushed his way through the side entrance and ran straight to the cash register. A customer had just paid for a few T-shirts.

"Can I have a plastic bag?" Pete barged in. "I'll pay you a dollar!"

The cashier smiled at him. "You can have it for free, but wait till I'm done."

Nervously, Pete stood next to the customer. Suddenly, this guy seemed to have all the time in the world. Pete looked at him with disgust.

Twelve minutes to go. In case of need, he had to go without the bag. But then the customer had finally paid and the cashier put a bag on Pete's hand. The Second Investigator thanked her and raced out of the department store. A load fell off him as now, everything was back to plan. But it's not over yet. He ran all the way to the fountain.

In eight minutes, he was there. Without paying any attention to the surroundings, he pulled the box out of his jacket and stuffed it into the bag. Now that he could breathe a little, he began to worry about Jupiter and Bob. His friends had finally helped him to flee. Hopefully, Dave hadn't taken his anger out on them.

Pete stood around inconspicuously and looked briefly at the passers-by and possible observers. He wanted to get rid of the box and then immediately look for Bob and Jupiter. He checked his watch—two minutes to six. It was about time. Slowly he strolled towards the litter bin.

With hectic looks, Pete scanned the surroundings. A scraping noise behind him made him collapse. Two boys skated by. They almost brushed against a tourist couple who were strolling around in front of Pete. The man stopped and Pete involuntarily stepped aside. But the man only pointed to the fountain and the woman laughed.

Suddenly, fear crept up his back. What if he was in the middle of a trap here? What if the caller came out and attacked him? They said this kind of thing had happened before, and not just in Hollywood movies. He wished Jupe and Bob were here, but he was alone. But there was no going back anyway.

It was only five metres more to the litter bin. Pete kept walking. With flashing lights and siren, a police car raced by the street behind him. Pete turned and looked at the car, which went into a side street and disappeared. He might have needed their help.

With the last three steps, he finally reached the litter bin. Pete took a determined breath and stuffed the parcel into the bin and moved away as quickly as he could. A great weight fell from his shoulders. It was done and nothing had happened to him.

Pete had not yet gone far when he heard a motorcycle roaring behind him. He turned around. Dave had appeared out of nowhere and braked right next to the litter bin. But he wasn't alone. There was another man there.

It was Tashi. He and Dave exchanged words in a foreign language. Pete was glad that he didn't understand them. Then Tashi went on the attack. Pete and the few other passers-by who were there saw what seemed like something out of an Asian action movie.

With a mixture of kung-fu, karate and other martial arts, the two men attacked each other. Tashi moved so skilfully that Dave could not use his great strength—knife throwing. After two minutes, the monk had forced Dave to the ground and tied his hands behind his back with a rope. Suddenly a man in a maroon and yellow robe came up to Tashi and congratulated him on his action.

Pete wouldn't know, but it had to be one of the other monks, either the lama himself or at least his adviser. Probably he had watched everything from the hotel. Tashi pointed to the litter bin and the monk started to examine it.

Actually Pete didn't care what happened to the box. More out of curiosity, he stopped to see how everything came to an end.

The monk rummaged through the bin, but without result. His movements became more hectic. Finally, the monk lifted the bin from its fixture, turned it over and poured out everything. The litter fell to the ground.

Pete immediately saw that the bag with the box was not there! Now he was totally confused. He had just put the box into the litter bin! It couldn't have disappeared into thin air. At the exact moment, when he turned around, someone must have sneaked up to the litter bin and took the box!

Dave uttered a triumphant laugh. Now Tashi went through the litter himself and searched everything once more. He also searched the immediate surroundings, without any result. Dave laughed more and more unrestrainedly and the other monk ran around excitedly instead of helping.

"They saw exactly how I put the box in the litter bin," Pete thought to himself. "I did my job. No one can blame me for anything." He turned around and left. He wanted to get away from the aggressive Tashi, away from Dave the knife thrower, and away from the place where the hunt for the small box was supposed to end.

But the box had once again disappeared and the Tibetan men were accordingly excited. But Pete didn't care anymore. He was out of it. His life was no longer threatened. Jupiter would still moan a little, because he did not like unsolved mysteries but Pete didn't care about that. He felt liberated. He felt the wind in his face as if it was the first time.

The air was filled with raindrops and Pete stretched his face towards them. He saw people running to find the shortest way home. But he himself walked very slowly. He enjoyed it. The wind whirled through his hair. He took a deep breath, and it smelled like the sea. And tomorrow, the storm would be over and he would lie down on the beach and not even think about the box or Buddhist monks or rebirth. He would enjoy the sun, surfing the Pacific waves, and looking for great girls. Maybe Kelly finally had time for him again. Pete closed his eyes and paused to contemplate...

“Hello, Pete,” said a voice close behind him. The Second Investigator winced and turned around.

“Rubbish-George!”

The tramp almost touched him, that’s how close he stood to him. The wind ruffled his yellowish-grey hair. With his right hand, George waved a white plastic bag. “Look what I found! Back there in the trash. You won’t believe what I found.”

“George! You... you got the box!”

“Yes, I did.” His voice had a triumphant chant.

Pete exhaled. History had caught up with him. Everything seemed to start all over again. He raised his hands defensively.

“No! George! Please don’t! I don’t want anything more to do with this box! Listen to me, George... I’m offering you... Okay, I’ll give you ten dollars if you keep that thing!”

“Keep it?” The tramp looked at him in surprise, but switched gears quickly. “Okay... I agree. Ten dollars and I’ll keep it!”

“No! Wait... ten dollars... uh... that’s not what I meant!” Pete stammered.

“Ten dollars. You said it! Hand it over!” George insisted.

Pete puffed. Just give Rubbish-George the ten dollars, then Pete could rest easy. He started digging in his pocket. “Will five dollars do?”

“Ten dollars... or I’ll turn this box over to the police and you can tell them the whole story. Maybe they’d be interested to know why you didn’t go to them right away...”

“Okay, okay...” Pete found enough cash—the amount he was saving to buy Kelly a drink, but then it just fell out. “Here... Do whatever you want with the box. Just don’t give it back to me. Don’t give it to the police either, okay?”

Rubbish-George took the money and nodded. He was grinning up to both ears, as far as one could tell with his beard. “Look, here come your friends!”

Pete looked up. In fact, Jupiter and Bob was running towards him.

Already from a distance, Bob shouted: “Pete! Did you manage to place the box in time? Man—that was a strong exit from you back there! Dave didn’t know how to react—chasing after you or trapping us! Finally, he tied us up, and then he stumbled off—”

“—And we were able to free ourselves,” Jupiter completed the sentence when he joined Bob and Rubbish-George. They greeted the tramp with a nod. “Unfortunately, we were too late for the fountain. Tell me, Pete, what happened?”

“What happened?” cried Pete. “Very simple! The delivery went wrong! At least for the anonymous caller. This sly man pulled the box out of the litter bin before anyone else could take it.” Pete pointed to the plastic bag. Rubbish-George shrugged regretfully and lifted the bag.

Jupiter looked irritated from George to Pete. “So it’s not certain who called you?” he said in amazement.

“No,” Pete said. “Dave and the other man literally put up a fight at the fountain. If they hadn’t fought so much, George wouldn’t have been able to grab the box at all. One of them must have made the call, but I didn’t care. I did my job and I walked away.”

“Hmm...” Jupiter pinched his lower lip.

Pete knew what Jupiter wanted. His anger rose. “Let the case go, Juve. Listen to this—I’m off these guys! Forget it. Let’s go for an ice cream. Then you can tell me how you figured out the box combination!”

“No, Pete.” Jupiter shook his head vigorously. “I want this case to be fully investigated, and I want to present this box to the lama. He is lost without the message it contains, and without unmasking the man who stole it from his hotel room.”

"I don't care about the lama," Pete explained. "And where is this message anyway? The box was empty!"

But Jupiter had already turned to Rubbish-George, who had listened to the conversation with interest. "Please give me the box, George."

Rubbish-George shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Why can't you do that?"

"Pete gave it to me... He sort of paid me to keep it," George replied.

"He what?" Jupiter yelled out alarmingly and then turned to Pete. "Pete, you stupid—"

The Second Investigator took a breath. "Look here, Juve. I gave him ten dollars to keep the box and I'm not going to be bothered with all this madness anymore!"

"Well," Rubbish-George said and raised his eyebrows. "I guess there's nothing you can do."

"But... but..." Jupiter searched for words, but not another sound came out.

Rubbish-George scratched his head. "Maybe there's another possibility," he muttered so softly into his beard that it was hard to understand.

But Jupiter had paid close attention. "What is it?"

"You can buy it from me, Jupiter for... uh... ten dollars!"

Pete almost choked. "Hey! I gave you money to keep the box! I insist on the deal, George!"

Rubbish-George smiled. "You paid me not to give it back to you! Or the police, for that matter. Apart from that, you said I could do whatever I want with it. There was no mention of Jupiter. So, how about it, Jupiter? You'll agree with me that it's a real bargain."

A smile ran across Jupiter's face. "I can follow the logic. Sorry, Pete, I gave my word to Lama Geshe."

He pulled out his wallet. As he counted the dollars, he quickly realized that there was slowly nothing left of the money earned through a lot of hard work at the salvage yard.

"Would five dollars do it?" he asked cautiously.

"Then you'll get it the day after tomorrow."

Grinding his teeth, Juve handed over the demanded sum. Rubbish-George smiled and put the money into the inside pocket of his leather jacket. Then he ceremonially presented Jupiter with the plastic bag. The First Investigator cast a sceptical glance inside. The box was there. Then he quickly put it in his jacket pocket.

"You should work in a bank, George—as tough as you negotiate!" Juve remarked.

"I used to... until I sort of switched to field work," Rubbish-George said. "Now, I only do clean business. It's been a real lucky day today." Rubbish-George rubbed his hands. "Boys, one day, I'm gonna invite you for my famous canned lentil soup!" He left, humming.

"Sure," Pete murmured after him. He was pretty upset. "And Juve can spoon out the lentil soup by himself. The best thing would be at the annual general meeting of hobos." Disgruntled, he turned to Jupiter.

Now probably the announcement of Jupiter's plan was on the agenda. They took a quick look over to the fountain. There was nothing more to be seen of Tashi and the knife thrower. The litter bin was back in its place as if nothing had happened. Only the rubbish flying around was evidence of what had happened.

The First Investigator first directed his friends to a café on the corner of the square. He felt they deserved a little snack.

"I haven't had a chance to tell you what Lama Geshe has told me," Jupiter began, when the three of them sat down, each armed with a Coke and a bag of chips. "Maybe then you'll understand why I bought the box back from Rubbish-George."

Jupiter recounted the conversation with the lama in as precise a manner as possible. "From what I understand it's about the rebirth of the Great Lama Sungaya, the principal lineage holder of the Kathu tradition. Shortly before his death, he sent the aforementioned box to Lama Geshe, which contained the secret message. It must be a reference to the family which he will be reborn into. This is regarded as the treasure of their tradition... and Lama Geshe is to give a solemn proclamation of the message at a ceremony tonight at 8 pm."

"I find the thought of being born again frightening," Pete interrupted him, who was still angry with Jupiter. "Take you, for example. In this way, mankind would never get rid of you! One day you'll be dead, and a new Jupiter Jones will be reborn who knows everything better than everyone, and who continues to dominate over his friends."

"Pete, I don't know what that—" Jupiter began to reply, before Bob interrupted him.

"I don't think, by the way, that you will appear as exactly the same person when you are reborn," Bob said. "As I understood it, the consciousness or energy, as the Buddhists say, is directed to another body. You can also become an animal, or a hopelessly wandering demon, if you have messed up on the path to enlightenment."

"Then Jupe will surely become a shrewd barn owl!"

"Shut up, Pete!"

"Or a disgusting rat!"

"That's it!" Bob shoved the Coke in his hand. "Have you had enough of your little romp, Pete?" Bob reprimanded Pete fiercely.

Jupiter cleared his throat and decided to ignore Pete for the senseless verbal attacks. After all, he was not entirely innocent of his friend's anger.

Bob continued: "And can we now finally turn to solving this case? How did you know the combination to open the box?"

"Also, what was in the box?" Pete added. "When you opened it, we all saw that it was empty!"

"One thing at a time," Jupe said calmly. "First I wanted to add a word about the role of the knife thrower Dave. As Mr Zhang said, a few conspirators are trying to gain influence over the Kathu lineage. Since the Great Lama is the principal lineage holder, the conspirators want to exploit his incarnation for themselves. My guess is that our pursuer is an agent who is supposed to secretly replace the message identifying the Great Lama's incarnation with one that identifies someone else. Then, through this false religious leader, the conspirators will take over the school and along with it, the direction of the spiritual teachings and tradition."

"Clever trick," mumbled Bob. "And Pete disrupted the scam at the warehouse."

"As to the combination to the box, I actually did not know it. However, Lama Geshe gave me a clue that enabled me to figure it out. During my meeting with him, he cited a verse that the Great Lama dedicated to him during his ordination ceremony. He was the only person who knew the dedication. And that same verse was on the tag on the box. That was the verse that Mr Zhang interpreted for us. So I figured out that there was a connection, and the combination code had something to do with Lama Geshe's ordination ceremony.

"As you know, the combination lock on the box has four dials. The first shows the twelve animals of the lunar calendar. The second shows the five elements. Finally, on each of the third and fourth dials, are numbers from 0 to 9.

"When I was under pressure from saving the box from exploding, I happened to recall something when I was skimming through the Buddhism book during the time Skinny was driving us around. In the chapter on the Tibetan Lunar Calendar, I found that each year is named by combining one of the five elements with one of the twelve animals in a certain systematic way, for example, the 'Metal Ox' year or the 'Wood Dragon' year. That gives

sixty unique names, and the names have to be repeated after a sixty-year cycle. And I also learned from the book that the Tibetan calendar started in the year 1027 which corresponds to the 'Fire Rabbit' year. So the first sixty-year cycle of the Tibetan calendar ran from 1027 to 1086.

"Now, Mr Zhang has also said that the ordination of a monk is an important event, and in the book, there was that photo showing Lama Geshe's ordination in 1966. And in the caption, it was mentioned that the event corresponded with the 'Fire Horse' year in the 16th cycle of the Tibetan calendar! So that's it—'Horse-Fire-16'. So logically, that had to be the combination, and it worked!"

"Well, done, Jupiter Jones!" Bob remarked, giving a pat on Jupe's shoulder.

"I'd say it was a perfect security precaution," Jupe added. "Any stranger would have guessed a year from the life of the Buddha."

"And what shall we do now?" asked the Second Investigator. In the meantime, he was sorry for what he had said to Jupiter. Jupiter was right—he couldn't always think only of himself.

Jupiter drew his two friends close to him. "It's simple—we must catch the thief of the box and save the ceremony. Listen..."

16. The Wheel of Life

It did not take long for The Three Investigators to walk to the place where the ceremony was to take place. Next to an inconspicuous door, a sign was embedded in the wall of the building —‘Rocky Beach Buddhist Centre’.

Jupiter activated the door knocker. A few seconds later, Tashi of all people opened the door. “What are you doing here? Haven’t you caused us enough trouble already? Get out of here!”

“We must speak with Lama Geshe,” Jupiter answered and did not move. “It would be a big mistake if you don’t let us talk to him.”

“Lama Geshe is preparing for the ceremony.”

Jupiter looked at his watch. It was just before 7:30 pm. “In half an hour... I just wonder how the ceremony to proclaim the incarnation of the Great Lama will take place... After all, I don’t believe that you have the information regarding his rebirth at all! Or do you believe in a miracle?”

Tashi was silent.

“So can you let us in?” said Jupiter. “We are not disturbing... and our message is important.”

“Then tell me.”

“We will only speak to the lama.”

“All right.” Tashi stepped aside and pointed at Pete’s video camera. “But without that thing.”

Pete nodded. “Okay, I’m turning it off.”

Tashi led The Three Investigators through a corridor. On the walls hung large posters of Tibetan Buddhist teachers and mandalas, but the boys did not pay attention to them. After a short time, they reached a door. Tashi asked them to wait in front of it and he went in.

Now Jupiter had time to look at the posters that were placed next to the entrance. There was one that was the same as the picture on box—the picture that featured a fierce, monster-like creature holding a wheel in its claws.

“In the meantime, I can tell you what this picture means,” said Jupiter. Bob and Pete had come closer. “In the book about Tibetan Buddhism, everything is described in detail. This is the ‘Wheel of Life’ and it is a symbolic representation of cyclic existence. Existence is a cycle of life, death, rebirth and suffering that one experiences. The six segments of the wheel represents the different realms of life.”

While The Three Investigators looked at the pictures, the door was opened again. Tashi waved them over. “Come in! But quietly! And please, take off your shoes! It is the custom.”

The detectives entered a dimly lit hall. It had been festively decorated for the occasion. In the foreground was a huge Buddha statue. On the red tiled floor sat several other monks and the members of the Rocky Beach Buddhist Centre. They could literally feel how depressed the atmosphere was.

The Three Investigators knew one or two of them by sight, in particular Sonny Elmquist, whom they had met in an earlier case. Jupiter was surprised to find that Mr Zhang was one of the guests as well.

Lama Geshe sat at the head of the hall and was surrounded by some religious relics. Jampa who was sitting next to the lama, wanted to stand up but Lama Geshe held him back and took the floor: "Jupiter, I greet you. And there are also your friends Bob and especially Pete, who had brought us so much excitement from what I hear. Forgive me that you have become involved in our affairs." He nodded to Pete politely.

"The situation was exacerbated by a group who were desperate to get the name of the family where the Great Lama Sungaya was reborn in," Lama Geshe continued. "They want to influence our lineage. I suppose they wanted to exchange the reference to the rebirth in order to lead us to a family they chose. I would have opened the box and read the false name without even suspecting it.

"I see you've met the agent Dawa—or 'Dave' as he is also known. Well, he didn't accomplish his original goal, but the box is gone, and the ceremony can't take place... However, there is still half-an-hour left, and I hope for a miracle."

"Well, sometimes miracles can happen," Jupiter said. He reached into his jacket and pulled out the box. He held it up in triumph.

A murmur went through the ranks of those present. Tashi jumped up, so did Jampa. Lama Geshe admonished them to calm down.

"So my vision did not deceive me," said Lama Geshe, smiling. "It was said that a young man would come to my aid! You have the box! I only hope it hasn't fallen into the wrong hands in the meantime."

Jupiter had to think of Worthington and especially Rubbish-George. He smiled. "All the bearers of the box are absolutely trustworthy," he said and took a step forward. "But first, we would like to show you all how we got it in the first place. Pete had a video camera with him in the warehouse. Would it be possible for you to get a television set?"

At the lama's instruction, a man left the room and returned shortly afterwards, rolling out a trolley with a television on it. Pete plugged in the equipment, wound the tape to the right place and played the recording in which two men in the warehouse were talking in a foreign language that many in the audience could not understand. However, there was complete silence in the hall.

When it came to the point where Dave became visible, and Pete stopped the recording. Then Mr Zhang stood up and said: "Your Holiness Lama Geshe... with your permission, I would like to interpret the conversation for those who don't understand the Tibetan language."

Lama Geshe nodded.

After a short pause, Mr Zhang began: "Apparently, there are two persons arguing, but I could only hear the first person clearly. They are talking about the box which we saw on the video. It seems that the first person had an assignment from someone else to remove something from the box. He wants to stick to that deal. However, the second person wants to pay the first person to do something else. Too bad I can't hear the other voice clearly."

"So who is the mysterious second person?" Jupiter asked and let his gaze circle meaningfully. "He is the person who stole the box from the lama's hotel room. Unfortunately, he is not visible on our video recording... but let us deal with this question later. Maybe we should open the box first. Now it is up to you, Your Holiness, or should I rather suggest that one of your aides do it? The box is not without danger."

Lama Geshe smiled. "I know the combination code. I am absolutely certain."

"You should not take the chance, Your Holiness." Jupiter looked Lama Geshe straight in the eye.

The lama caught his gaze and he understood. “All right, if you say so. Better safe than sorry. Well, yes, who do I give the box to...”

“I can do it!” Tashi jumped up.

“Let me do it,” Jampa suggested. “I am your representative, after all.”

Jupiter nodded imperceptibly. Lama Geshe then handed the box to Jampa. Suddenly, the lama’s hand shook.

Jampa did not feel the change in Lama Geshe. All his attention was on the box. He reached into the pocket of his cloak and pulled out a cloth with which he nervously wiped his forehead.

“Nothing will happen,” Lama Geshe said. “The combination code is the date—”

“—Of your ordination as a lama... in the Tibetan calendar,” Jupiter finished the sentence somewhat cheekily.

Lama Geshe looked at him in astonishment and interrupted the incipient murmur by naming the first code: “That’s what it is... Horse!”

While Lama Geshe said the next two codes and Jampa turned the dials, the three detectives carefully worked their way near the adviser. That’s how they had planned it with Jupiter.

Just as they were standing next to Jampa, Lama Geshe called the last digit. “Six.”

Just as Jampa turned the last dial, Jupiter mumbled: “Now!”

The Three Investigators rushed towards Jampa and caught him completely by surprise. Pete was the first one to get hold of his hand. Despite the confusion, Pete managed to keep a firm grip on Jampa’s hand. Bob and Jupiter had enough to do with fending off Tashi’s attacks until finally Lama Geshe put a stop to the commotion.

Some of those present stood up and gathered around Pete, who wouldn’t let go of Jampa. Jampa had clenched his hand in a fist.

Jupiter pointed to it. “No matter how hard you clench your fist, I know what is in your hand,” said the First Investigator. “It is a piece of paper with a message—the information as to the rebirth of the Great Lama Sungaya. Unfortunately, it is a forged message. Mr Jampa, you have just seen your last chance to slip it into the box undetected.”

Lama Geshe had turned pale. “Is that true, Jampa?” he asked in a fragile voice.

His adviser did not answer. He pinched his mouth shut doggedly. He tried once more to free himself from Pete’s grip, but Pete’s fists were like handcuffs.

Jupiter turned to the lama. “Here it is, the mysterious second person! Lama Geshe, I forgot to ask when you were meditating this morning, was it between 9 and 11 am?”

“You have already given the answer,” Lama Geshe said quietly. He guessed what Jupiter’s question was aiming at.

Jupiter nodded and looked at Jampa again. “You have made a big mistake, Jampa,” he continued. “I don’t know if you noticed the clock on the video. It showed the time of the recording—which started about quarter to ten.” Jupiter raised his voice. “But at that time, according to you, Jampa, the box wasn’t stolen yet. You claimed to have alerted Lama Geshe just before he finished his meditation—so at a quarter to eleven at the earliest! That is, when you returned from your little outing.”

Almost unnoticed Tashi had crept behind Jampa. He looked concerned. Jupiter was clear that he would detain Jampa as soon as Jupiter had finished presenting his case.

The First Investigator continued: “Because that was your plan, Jampa. You sent Tashi away for several hours to inspect this Buddhist Centre. You knew that Lama Geshe would not come out of his room for two hours because of his meditation. Even before that, you had already got yourself a waiter’s uniform—but not to put it on. Rather, you wanted to back up

your tall tale with an alleged piece of evidence. Shortly after nine, you grabbed the box and secretly left the room.

“You got a bicycle and cycled to the old warehouse to meet Dave. There, he was to open the box with some equipment. From Mr Zhang’s interpretation of the conversation, I suspect that you knew that Dave’s assignment was just to remove the real message, but you wanted to bring your people into the game. You wanted to put a false message into the box, but Dave was firm in his original assignment. That’s what your argument with him was about.

“A little while later, Pete got involved and took the box. He managed to lose Dave, but you, Jampa, was also in pursuit.” Jupiter paused and turned to Pete. “Didn’t you notice a cyclist when Dave chased you on your way back?” he asked.

Pete nodded. “Yes. It could have been Jampa.”

Jupe continued: “You saw Pete flee to a car rental agency, but you didn’t see where he hid the box. But by falsely claiming that you found his keys, you went to the car rental office and found out our contact number. Then you went back to the hotel and stuffed the waiter’s uniform into the garbage chute so that it looked like the thief had left it behind. Finally, you alerted Lama Geshe about the alleged theft.

“In the ensuing confusion, you took the opportunity to call us and intimidate us. Pete, it is clear that it is Jampa who threatened your life. He wanted to secure the box to get a second chance to exchange the message.”

“Come on, show everybody what’s in your hand,” Pete said.

Jampa opened his hand weakly. A white piece of paper fell on the floor. Bob picked it up and passed it to Lama Geshe. Everybody was silent as the lama took his time to study the contents carefully.

Finally, Lama Geshe said: “You are right about everything, Jupiter. It is a reference to the family to which Jampa has connection to. He wanted the new leader to come from there.”

Jupiter enjoyed the triumph. Tashi stepped up to Jampa and grabbed him by the arm and said something in their language.

Lama Geshe nodded sadly at Tashi and said tiredly: “So my vision has come true after all. I was foretold a loss and a bitter truth. Both have come true, albeit differently than I had first thought. I did not lose the box but my most valuable adviser. Jampa has betrayed me and that is a great disappointment for me. I have to face the facts.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob—I thank you for your commitment. Without you, the betrayal would not have been discovered and most importantly, I would not be able to perform the important ceremony.”

He looked at the clock. “It is eight o’clock local time. Just as my astrologers have calculated, it’s time to open the box. Now I will begin the ceremony which will culminate in the proclamation of the rebirth of the Great Lama Sungaya.”

17. The Secret in the Box

Lama Geshe picked up the box and checked the combinations. Then he pushed the two buttons to the side. There was a faint click and the latches sprang open immediately.

“Wait...” Jupiter began.

Slowly, Lama Geshe put his finger to his lips. “Jupiter, Pete and Bob, I would like to invite you to remain here for the ceremony,” he said in a softer voice. “You deserve to be present at this holy occasion, even though you are not followers of our religion. I have to start the ceremony without any delay.”

Jupiter cleared his throat, but Lama Geshe was no longer distracted. The lama held on to the box but did not open the lid. He walked towards a table where several relics were placed. Then the ceremony commenced with the lama leading other monks in reciting prayers. The Three Investigators had sat down with the other guests, who followed the proceedings eagerly.

Jupiter covered his face with his hands.

“What’s wrong with him?” Bob whispered to Pete.

“I don’t know. Maybe he’s worried because the box is empty.”

“You mean, after the contest with Skinny, he didn’t put the message back?” Bob wondered.

They heard Jupiter snorting.

“I don’t know,” Pete said. “You know he never tells us everything.”

A monk told them to be quieter. Bob and Pete fell silent. In the meantime, Lama Geshe had put the box on a piece of cloth. It was so quiet in the room, they could have heard a pin drop. Only Jupiter’s panting disturbed him.

The prayers continued on for about fifteen minutes, after which there was complete silence for another minute.

Finally, Lama Geshe said something in the Tibetan language and provided an English translation: “I will now proclaim the incarnation of the Great Lama Sungaya.”

Then he opened the box.

With a dignified movement, Lama Geshe took out a piece of paper. He looked at it and fell silent. There was no movement on the lama’s face. Time seemed frozen. Pete and Bob slid restlessly around on the bottom of their pants. They looked at Jupiter, who had literally buried his face between his hands.

Then Lama Geshe began to say in a halting voice: “What is the meaning of this? How did this card get in the box?” He looked at the card again. It said:



Jupiter took a breath and stood up. “My most sincere apologies, Your Holiness. On the arduous journey of the box, a situation arose where I had to open it to save the message. Please permit me to explain...”

Jupe went on to explain how he made the connection between the verse dedicated to Lama Geshe on his ordination ceremony and the verse that was on the tag on the box. From the format of the combination code, he figured out that it had to be the year of Lama Geshe’s ordination ceremony.

“I decided to take the genuine message out as a precaution in case we lose the box again...” Jupe added. “I believed that this was the only way to save the message. In any case, I apologize to you! I’m sorry I failed to warn you.”

During Jupiter’s explanation, Lama Geshe’s facial features had become visibly relaxed. After a short pause, the lama said: “My vision showed me that I would get help from an intelligent young man. That was a test... and you passed it!”

Jupiter beamed with elation.

“So you are still in possession of the message that the Great Lama Sungaya put in the box?” the lama asked.

“That’s right.” Jupiter started digging in his pocket.

First he unearthed a bunch of keys, an old handkerchief, followed by a pack of chewing gum. Finally, he took out a crumpled piece of paper.

“Ahem...” He carefully unfolded the piece of paper and smoothed it. Then he passed it on to Lama Geshe with a dignified gesture.

Now the religious leader would finally get the information that was so important for him and his lineage—the name of the family where he would find the incarnation of the Great Lama Sungaya.

Lama Geshe took the paper with trembling hands. His face glowed as he read the text. “There is a family in the San Fernando Valley,” he translated the message for Jupiter, Pete and Bob. He smiled. “I know them. Everything will be all right now.”

He turned around and the ceremony took its course as if it had never been interrupted.

After everything was completed, Lama Geshe insisted on personally escorting The Three Investigators outside. When they went out into the fresh air, the wind had died down a little.

Relief at the good outcome was written all over Lama Geshe’s face. He shook hands with The Three Investigators and bowed to them.

“Thank you very much. At last, this one major task is done.” He laughed. “Our religion has this little trick about being born again. You experience your life and learn from it... otherwise, you won’t get any further in the stages of wisdom. But I believe that if you take this to heart, you will never do anything wrong, no matter what religion you belong to.”

He turned to Jupiter. “You have your principles, Jupiter... and they’re strong principles. There’s just one thing you might want to think about... You like to toy with big performances. Ask your friends how they feel about that.”

Jupiter kept his poker face. “I know exactly how they feel about it,” he said and took a breath. “They find it... just great!”

Bob and Pete were stunned. Then Jupiter laughed.

18. Karma Works in Mysterious Ways

Pete rewound the video recording and watched the last sequence again. “Wow! There’s drive in there! Great car chase! Our Hollywood director is gonna be patting us on the back!”

“Maybe he’ll even offer our work to a real movie company.” Bob dreamed. He looked pensive over Pete’s shoulder at the screen of the movie editing studio, although there was nothing to be seen there for a long time. “And we’re going to go to the cinema with our movie and get famous!”

“And win an Oscar at the awards ceremony!” Jupe grinned.

“An Oscar?” Pete asked back. “Just one for the best cinematography? No, I think at least three! You each should have one too!”

Jupiter and Bob laughed, but despite all the amusing exaggerations, they were mightily proud of their work—especially Bob. After all he had had the idea to develop a detective story out of the event which had almost cost Pete his head and neck and to incorporate many of the scenes they shot into the movie.

Jupiter had the images they had just seen go through his mind again. “The real shots and the re-enacted scenes fit together unusually well indeed,” he thought.

Pete nodded understandingly. With a few movements, he switched off the video editing device. “Let’s call it a day. I think it turned out to be a good story. No one will notice that it was really about Lama Geshe’s box.”

Lama Geshe had insisted that the story about the secret of the box cannot be made public. Bob then came up with the trick of simply choosing a secret espionage message as the contents of the box. In addition to the chase scenes at the warehouse and in Rocky Beach, which they had in the box, they had later re-shot the appropriate intermediate sequences. So the real events had turned into a fictional story, even though many parts of it were true in a certain way.

“I’m especially looking forward to tomorrow,” Pete announced when they had packed their stuff and were about to leave the studio. “Because then we will edit the scene where Skinny Norris realized that he had to kick-box with *Los Ramones* alone. I left the camera rolling when Jupe opened the box. It’s just too bad you punched him in the back so fast, Bob.”

“I had to!” Bob exclaimed. “... So that the attention was drawn to us and Jupe could take the message out of the box.”

Pete snorted away. “The look on Skinny’s face was really something to frame up.”

“Why not make a photo out of it and we can stick it up at Headquarters,” Bob suggested, amidst laughter.

“Tragically funny!” Pete laughed as they closed the studio door.

“He would make a great stand-up comedian!” Bob added.

Jupiter dampened the high spirits a bit. “Before he does any stand-up act, I guess he has to recover from the bruises he got from *Los Ramones*.”

“Anyway, the prospect of becoming a famous comedian will allay his concerns,” Bob remarked. “It can’t have been that bad, but karma works in mysterious ways.”

“Talking about that, I can tell you that my encounter and conversation with Lama Geshe was an eye-opener,” Jupiter said. “Did you notice that all this time when he and his religion were facing a huge problem, he was ever so calm. It was like he was letting things turn out the way it is supposed to be...”

“In that way, you can see that in our problem with Skinny,” Jupe continued. “You remember how we were so bent on getting back at him for what he did to us so many times in the past?”

“Yeah, especially the last time...” Pete added. “How can I ever forget that?”

“This time, we didn’t actually do anything to him,” Jupe continued. “It was he who wanted to get a story out of us. It was he who brought us to *Los Ramones*. All those cheating that he dwells on, eventually his plan fell through and it was not our doing. It just happened.”

“He got what he deserved,” Pete remarked.

“Yeah, probably it turned out the way how it was supposed to be...” Jupe said.

“Yeah, karma works in mysterious ways...” Bob added.

They were still grinning when Worthington drove the Rolls-Royce to the front of the studio building as agreed. They waited until the chauffeur got out and opened the doors for them. “Thanks, Worthington!”

“So did you gentlemen crack the secret combination of the box?” the chauffeur asked.

“Of course,” Jupiter replied. “The box and its precious contents were returned to its owner.”

“Any other outcome would have surprised me very much,” Worthington remarked and started the car.

As they rolled along the coast, Jupiter told him the whole story.

“But why did you put your business card into the box?” Worthington asked.

“Well, first of all, I did not mean any disrespect to the religious tradition,” Jupe explained. “Just before we went to the Buddhist Centre, I had thought about what could happen if the box gets stolen again. That was when I took the genuine message out as a precaution, and at the spur of the moment, I placed our card into it so that if someone steals the box, they will... uh... well, know that they have been outwitted... uh... by us!”

“Anyway Lama Geshe did not reprimand me for that action. To him, the message was the most important and he knew that the one that I eventually gave him was genuine.”

Worthington had a good chuckle.

“Oh, yes, there is one more thing,” Jupiter said as they turned into the road towards the salvage yard. “After the ceremony, Lama Geshe pulled me aside and told me another secret. The box actually did not contain an explosive. It was made known as such to prevent unauthorized access to the message. I suspect that Jampa was also aware of it, which was why he wanted to get Dave to open the box for him to put in the fake message. In any case, the box only served as a container for the message, which was most important to the monks. Lama Geshe explained that the box has served its purpose, and he doesn’t need it anymore.”

With that, Jupiter pulled out from his jacket, the reddish-brown box that Lama Geshe had given them as a souvenir. In admiration, he turned it in his hands. “This box will have a place of honour in our Headquarters!” he announced.

“I have a much better idea,” Pete said. “How about we sell it to Rubbish-George—for thirty dollars!”

Then he started laughing. “Chill out, Jupe! I’m just kidding!”